

**ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY**

**NEOLIBERALISM WITH A HUMAN FACE? CRITICAL  
PERSPECTIVES ON HOLLYWOOD SCIENCE FICTION**

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

## ABSTRACT

### NEOLIBERALISM WITH A HUMAN FACE? CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HOLLYWOOD SCIENCE FICTION

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This paper explores the contemporary portrayal of US neoliberalism in Hollywood science fiction cinema to investigate in how far and in which form it addresses an increasing loss of confidence in the system. Analysing James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) and *Elysium* (2013), Len Wiseman's *Total Recall* (2012) and the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas* (2012) as prime examples of movies that encapsulate science fiction's continued focus on neoliberal stakeholders, this thesis examines motifs in each feature film *vis-à-vis* their relationship to evidence of discernible self-doubt in the idea that US-led neoliberalism is superior. By combining critical discourse (Foucault 1966, 1969, 1978, 1980) with literary analyses of postcolonial (Said 1978, Shohat and Stam 1994, Hardt and Negri 2000, Kapur and Wagner 2013) and cinematic (Cornea 2007, Geraghty 2009, Ryan and Lenos 2012) works, this investigation explores these films as cases that may genuinely destabilise neoliberalism.

Each of the five selected films demonstrate a certain unease with the notion that neoliberalism can achieve global stability to varying degrees – suggesting a re-evaluation of the parameters of US neoliberal identity. However, while neoliberal failings are considered in these hugely successful sci-fi films, each example simultaneously endorses key aspects of (neo)colonialism and neoliberalism. There remains a general propensity to promote US neoliberal values of individualism and rationality as superior contrary to stereotypical portrayals of the Other as feminine, irrational and inferior.

**Key words:** neoliberalism, discourse, postcolonialism, Hollywood cinema, Hollywood science fiction.

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**NEOLIBERALISM WITH A HUMAN FACE? CRITICAL  
PERSPECTIVES ON HOLLYWOOD SCIENCE FICTION**

## ***Introduction***

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism across the former Soviet Union were widely regarded as important events that led to a decisive victory for US neoliberalism as a global socio-economic ideal.<sup>1</sup> According to a popular neoliberal narrative (see Wilson 2002, Varoufakis 2018), an ongoing, decades-long struggle between US-led democratic capitalism and authoritarian socialism ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, despite such claims of victory (see Fukuyama 1992), which have been allegorised in popular films like Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997),<sup>2</sup> Zemeckis' *Cast Away* (2000) (see Weaver-Hightower 2006, 2007, Rings 2011) and Padilha's *Robocop* (2014), a number of events – most notably the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the global recession of 2008 – have served to severely contest popular assumptions that US neoliberalism is a superior socio-economic model. Concerning the Iraq War in particular, Doran writes that:

A decade after the 9/11 attack that launched the War on Terror and the subsequent Iraq invasion that fundamentally changed the course of US history, there is still a shortage of creditable explanations...what has resulted is a decade of soul-searching, and a deep divide between left and right, progressive and conservative (2012: 3f.).<sup>3</sup>

Drawing upon linkages between these two events, like much of postcolonial literature, this study proposes that the term 'neoliberal' is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is an

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<sup>1</sup> See Fukuyama (1992), Bartolovich and Lazarus (2002) and Mishra (2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Hurley (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Petras comments that the Iraq War has 'depleted the [US] economy, deprived American corporations of oil wealth, and reduced the living standards of US citizens' (2014: 54) – not to mention ruined the political reputation of former president George W. Bush. In addition to a distrust of political elites challenging the notion of US hegemonic domination, Birch and Mykhnenko claim that on top of this, the 2008 financial crisis once and for all 'exposed fault lines in the neoliberal economic order that has been dominant for three decades' (2014: 1); further supposing that the event has laid bare the 'conceit at the heart of neoliberal thought' (ibid.: 3). The combination of these two epoch-defining events and the effect that its resulting governmental policies have had on the general public has been seized upon by opportunistic right-wing political parties across the world, culminating in the election of Donald Trump as US president.

economic one, with a historical relationship to European colonialism and twentieth century American imperialism (see, Appadurai 1990, Hardt and Negri 2000, Chowdry and Nair 2004, Krishna 2008, Mignolo 2011, Lazarus 2011, Kapur and Wagner 2013).<sup>4</sup> In this context, neoliberalism can initially be defined as an ingrained set of behaviours, beliefs and modes of thought concerned with the proliferation of the intellectual, cultural, political and economic superiority of Anglo-Saxon, Christian identity and values.<sup>5</sup>

Hollywood, the home of US mass-produced cinema, has often been the subject of critical interrogation regarding its dissemination of neoliberal perspectives (see Roberts 2006, Rieder 2008, Geraghty 2009, Riegler 2016). As a result of its far-reaching appeal, it has in some cases become a key strategic tool of narrative ‘inclusion and exclusion’ (Sheridan 2012: 122) for neoliberal and corporate elites who hold an interest in continually propagating discourses critical to maintaining the economic status quo.<sup>6</sup>

As a genre with the storytelling potential to indulge the limits of the human imagination and a narrative medium that is unbound by the limits of the physical world, science fiction can be distinguished from other categories of film because of its ability to manipulate those factors in order to implicitly allegorise a broad range of socio-economic issues. In this way Matthews (2007), Cornea (2007), Rieder (2008, 2011), and Geraghty (2009) have argued that science fiction often stabilises and propagates US neoliberalism and notions of European superiority, whereas Redmond (2004), Booker (2006) and Kerslake (2007) have discussed the genre as one that is unique in its ability to provide an outlet for critiques on contemporary society.

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<sup>4</sup> Kapur and Wagner describe neoliberalism as identifying with a certain ‘history, structure and set of relations’ (2013: 4) related to European colonialism.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed explanation on this, see 1.1.

<sup>6</sup> Prominent director Robert Altman commented following the attacks that Hollywood’s tendency to disseminate imagery of mass destruction ‘created the atmosphere for 9/11’, claiming that ‘nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they’d seen it in a movie’ (*The Guardian* 2001). Then, in November 2001, senior advisor to President Bush Karl Rove seemingly responded to this by arranging a summit with 40 top-level Hollywood studio bosses, directors and producers. The agenda of this gathering was to agree on methods in which the industry might assist with the administration’s ‘communication strategy’ of ‘shoring up support for the US action in Afghanistan’ (see King 2001: n.p.).

Upon consideration of Doran, Petras and Birch and Mykhnenko on the ‘decline’ of neoliberalism and the assumption that cracks of doubt have appeared in the superiority of US ideals, this thesis proposes to investigate in how far this model is interrogated in the genre of contemporary (Hollywood) science fiction cinema. It is a matter that deserves further attention upon reflection of the role that a heavily ingrained allegiance to neoliberal and (neo)colonial discourse in mainstream politics and media has played in the recent rise of populist right-wing politics, growing worldwide income inequality, and in particular, ‘developing nationalist...and xenophobic reactions to the Other’ (see Rings 2016: 1).

Therefore, this thesis offers a qualitative postcolonial analysis of four popular Hollywood science fiction productions: James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009) and *Elysium* (2013) and Len Wiseman’s *Total Recall* (2012) – as well as the Wachowskis’ and Tom Tykwer’s independent epic *Cloud Atlas* (2012), with the aim of investigating how cinema approaches this supposed loss of confidence. This manuscript is the first to propose an in-depth investigation of neoliberal representation in science fiction with a focus on five commercially successful films. It will add to existing analyses of *Avatar*, *District 9*, *Elysium*, *Cloud Atlas* and *Total Recall* available in journals, books and essays and go further than those works in terms of its commitment to an analysis in the framework of contemporary US neoliberal and (neo)colonial representations.

While a number of scholars have analysed the chosen features in a postcolonial (Veracini 2011, Burgchardt and Ott 2011, Ng 2015), socio-political (Peck 2014, Fernández-Menicucci 2014), and/or ideological (Žižek 2010, Holiday 2014) framework, there is a shortage of comparative and literary criticism within a neoliberal milieu, meaning that this research will facilitate an examination of Hollywood’s contemporary discursive messages in the face of an increasingly globalised and interconnected world.

This thesis is underpinned by a Foucault-based understanding of discourse (1966, 1969, 1978, 1980) as a system that structures the way that we interpret reality;<sup>7</sup> a phenomenon that that simultaneously supports and destabilises power (Foucault 1978: 100). I find that the fluid nature of discourse best accounts for the often ambiguous nature of human agency and cultural representation, more so perhaps than Marxist concepts of ideology (see Marx 1867) and the implication of an ‘absolute truth’. This can be highlighted in Mills’ discussion of discourse as a phenomenon that at once ‘transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’ (2003: 54). Foucault himself describes discourse as:

The general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualisable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements...we should think of a discourse as existing because of a complex set of practices which try to keep them in circulation and other practices which try to fence them off from others and keep those other statements out of circulation (In: Mills 2003: 53f.).

In his analysis of discourse, Simons writes that ‘societies possess narratives or texts of some kind or another that become the object of variation, transformation, or commentary. In our own culture, these ‘primary’ works are religious, legal, literary and, to some extent, scientific texts’ (1994: 27). This study would also add cinema and media to this list of ‘primary works’ in consideration of recent technological advancements and the scope of influence that these two mediums have come to acquire over popular contemporary popular culture (see Appadurai 1990, Shohat and Stam 1994, Rieder 2008 and Geraghty 2009). In this way, discourse is crucial in constructing identities, maintaining self-concepts and in understanding notions of the Self and Other.

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<sup>7</sup> See McHoul and Grace (1993), Deleuze (1999), Rouse (2003), Sheridan (2012).

As central to neoliberal mentalities, colonial discourse in particular has been the subject of comprehensive discussion (Fanon 1963, 1967, Memmi 1965, Césaire 1972) with regard to the manner in which certain aspects of fictional storytelling, and the depiction of the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, uphold long-held ideas of European, and now perhaps, US neoliberal superiority.<sup>8</sup>

By combining critical discourse and literary analyses of postcolonial (Said 1978, Shohat and Stam 1994, Hardt and Negri 2000, Mignolo 2011, Kapur and Wagner 2013) and cinematic (Roberts 2006, Cornea 2007, Rieder 2008, Geraghty 2009, Ryan and Lenos 2012) works, this investigation will attempt to answer three central research questions:

- 1) In how far does each selected feature critique US neoliberalism?
- 2) To what extent do the protagonists, supporting characters and contextual settings support the idea of a change in established neoliberal and (neo)colonial representations?
- 3) Which basic neoliberal and (neo)colonial binaries continue to be disseminated in each film?

This work consists of two central stages: a theoretical chapter and a five-part film analysis. Chapter one: 'Neoliberalism in Contemporary Hollywood Science Fiction' introduces the thesis' methodology, exploring its key concept 'neoliberalism' within a discursive and filmic framework. 1.2 and 1.3 critically interrogates scholarly perspectives of neoliberalism from secondary sources in order to examine the extent to which there is a link between Eurocentric (Shohat and Stam 1994) colonialism, neocolonialism and contemporary neoliberalism. 1.4 examines discontinuities with older neoliberal representations by reviewing secondary sources

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<sup>8</sup> On this subject, Chowdry and Nair wrote: 'the facile notion that we have reached the "end of ideology" obscures the workings of power in a global capitalist political economy, and disguises its cultural...underpinnings. It further elides the racialised, gendered, and class processes that underwrite global hierarchies. Conventional International Relations with its focus on great power politics and security, read narrowly, naturalises these hierarchies and thus reproduces the status quo (2004: 1).

on Hollywood sci-fi literature and analysing a corpus of prominent popular sci-fi features. 1.5 investigates colonial and neoliberal continuities in Hollywood sci-fi, examining a history of science fiction literature within a postcolonial framework. It employs the screen examples of Schaffner's *The Planet of the Apes* (1968), Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien Covenant* (2017), and Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) to scrutinise in how far these continuities are reconstructed in mainstream film.

The film analysis section of the thesis begins from chapter two. In general, each of these features have been selected not just because they are well-known in mainstream media for their criticism of power-hungry neoliberalism and corporate exploitation, but more so because of their massive commercial successes and accessibility in terms of global spectatorship. It is the assertion of this thesis that this creates the broadest possible potential for particular viewpoints, principles and values to be disseminated.

In this context, as well as scrutinising directors and scriptwriters – who naturally consider the taste, interests and cultural values of their audience in the development of plots and characters, it is equally crucial to consider the role of studios and US policy makers when analysing works of popular Hollywood film. In this regard *District 9* and *Elysium* director Neill Blomkamp has very explicitly expressed his frustration with mainstream Hollywood filmmaking because of interference from top-level studio bosses with respect to storyline direction (see Wilkins 2010: n.p.).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, military documents obtained under the US Freedom of Information Act (1966) in 2017 reveal substantial intervention by the United States Department of Defence on Hollywood productions, comprising of 'the ability to manipulate scripts or even prevent films too critical of the Pentagon from being made' (Secker and Alford 2017: n.p.). The revelations include evidence of direct influence upon some of Hollywood's most

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<sup>9</sup> Wilkins writes: '[Blomkamp] has announced that he'll keep making films on the relative cheap, because it's the only way to make science fiction movies with creative freedom' (2010: n.p.).

popular film franchises like the *Transformers* (2004-2017) and *Iron Man* series (2008, 2010, 2013).<sup>10</sup>

This study regards income to be the strongest indicator for popularity as it can be used as a good measure for potential impact on worldwide audiences. All of the selected films were successful in their own right in this respect, and therefore each warrants an in-depth investigation in this neoliberal context. *Total Recall* grossed close to \$200 million and was particularly popular with East Asian audiences (see *Internet Movie Database* 2015), this total is only slightly less than *District 9*, which took \$210 million (Nel 2012: 548) in ticket receipts. Blomkamp's follow-up *Elysium* was not as well-received critically as *District 9* but was certainly more profitable financially: raking in some \$286 million at the box office, it was among 2013's top 30 highest grossing films (see *Box Office Mojo* 2015b). The Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas* became the highest grossing independent feature of all time with receipts of \$130 million (*Box Office Mojo* 2015c) upon its release; while last but not least, to this day Cameron's *Avatar* remains the highest grossing feature ever made with box office sales of \$2.8 billion worldwide (*Box Office Mojo* 2015a).

Linking these substantial financial figures to the widely accepted scholarly standpoint that films both reflect and shape the epistemological hopes, fears, apprehensions and anxieties of the population audience (Bernstein and Studlar 1997, Belton 2005, Riegler 2016, Rings 2016), the five features chosen for analysis here can all be claimed to have made a significant cinematic impact in terms of popularity.

The analysis section of the thesis begins with *Avatar*, which was selected because of the praise it received from a number of prominent mainstream critics for its anti-corporate and anti-neoliberal message – and the interest it received from scholars (Veracini 2011, Burgchardt and Ott 2011) who, while discussing its capitalist and colonial perspectives, failed to investigate

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<sup>10</sup> See Secker and Alford (2017).



how a defence of neoliberalism may have been adjusted in this era of self-doubt in the superiority of the model.

Chapter three scrutinises Canadian-South African director Neill Blomkamp's big-screen debut *District 9*. In addition to popularity being a key reason for selection as discussed above, this film also has been chosen for the narrative's focus upon the risks of surrendering government control to an unaccountable private sector organisation. In this way *District 9* draws comparisons with real-life post-invasion Iraq flash points: for example the mercenary army's trigger-happy approach to killing alien 'prawns' appears to tacitly allegorise the 2004 Blackwater incident in which unarmed Iraqi civilians were shot and killed by employees of the private military contractor. Moreover the manner in which the mistreatment of the hapless aliens in the bio-lab can be said to be visually evocative of the abuse that prisoners received at the hands of US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad in 2003 also deserves further scrutiny. In light of this, the chapter will investigate to what extent *District 9* genuinely criticises modern-day US neocolonialism and foreign policy.

*Elysium*, Blomkamp's follow-up to that feature, is the subject of enquiry in chapter four. Released in 2013, it is the most conspicuous example of the five selected films in terms of a story that reflects the anxious public mood of post-financial crisis United States *vis-à-vis* rising wealth inequality. This chapter gives special attention to the spatial construction of the Elysian base in contrast to an economically shattered Los Angeles with the aim of ascertaining in how far *Elysium* assuages or exacerbates these concerns.

This will be followed by an analysis of the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's epic *Cloud Atlas* in chapter five, which has been selected because of its strong liberal position and anti-conservative agenda (see Martin 2013). Officially an independent film, *Cloud Atlas* surely allows for relative creative freedom on the part of the directors, and in this way it should highlight the pressures that Hollywood studios place upon filmmakers to adhere to established

neoliberal patterns and cultural hierarchies for the sake of entertainment. At the same time however it may indicate the potential and limits of big-budget independent films in breaking with traditional neoliberal representations on screen. Of *Cloud Atlas*'s six interlocking stories, in-depth analyses of the Pacific Islands, San Francisco and Neo Seoul stories should give some idea as to the extent to which the film departs from established patterns.

Len Wiseman's *Total Recall* remake is the subject of enquiry in chapter six. Like *Elysium*, income inequality is central to the plot, as are themes of resource distribution and socio-economic marginality. To accentuate this, *Total Recall* appears to explicitly reconstruct colonial binaries with its depiction of the economic dominance that the 'United Federation of Britain' (UFB) has over the poorer, underdeveloped 'Colony' – also drawing upon the same apprehensions regarding rising wealth inequality that are seen in *Elysium*. In this chapter, this spatial disparity will be investigated along with the role of protagonist Douglas Quaid (Colin Farrell) in fighting against the (neo)colonialism of the UFB. Once again this study is distinctive in its examination of the extent to which a declining confidence in neoliberal representation is evident in popular Hollywood science fiction, and these five popular features should provide adequate evidence of in how far this is so.

# ***1. Neoliberalism and Contemporary Hollywood Science Fiction***

## ***1.1 Preliminary Remarks***

This chapter explores the link between colonial and (neo)colonial constructs and contemporary neoliberalism. It also investigates different concepts of neoliberalism from prominent scholars in the field and examines to which degree they are present in twenty-first century Hollywood science fiction cinema.

Appadurai (1990), Blaut (1993), Hardt and Negri (2000), Krishna (2008), Lazarus (2011) and Mignolo (2011, 2012) are just a few prominent academics<sup>11</sup> who have produced detailed works on this complex notion of neoliberalism within a postcolonial framework. Krishna's discussion in particular concisely articulates the central underpin of the idea:

Although the specific terms postcolonialism and globalisation have become popular only in the past two decades or so, they emerge from a far longer intellectual history on the growth and decline of various regions and nations in the world economy and the intertwined histories of capitalism and colonialism (2008: 13).

Chowdry and Nair's discussion of the contemporary universal 'business civilization' as a phenomenon 'anchored in a particular history and discourse...[that] ultimately is used to justify and legitimate forms of class domination on a global scale' (2004: 7) is also worth mentioning as a description that encapsulates a modern understanding of neoliberalism.

In this way, each excerpt above draws our attention to an inexorable link between the mechanisms that comprise the historical control and exploitation of indigenous peoples by

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<sup>11</sup> See also Rieder (2008), Kapur and Wagner (2013), Weaver-Hightower (2006, 2007), Akita (2002), Mishra (2014), Bartolovich, and Lazarus (2002), Loomba (1998), Chowdry and Nair (2004), Macfie (2000), Vasquez (2014) and Ashcroft et al (1998).

European powers and the later development of capitalism as a world system (see Wilson 2002: 2), which rejects the accepted popular opinion that the two processes are distinct. Kapur and Wagner follow a similar line of argumentation, asserting that the contemporary neoliberal model is identifiable with a 'history, structure and set of relations' (2013: 4) that can be related to European colonialism, a phenomenon also defined by Appadurai as the 'new global cultural economy' (1990: 6).

Hardt and Negri's analysis presents an alternative perspective to that of the above scholars, pointing out a divergence in the European ideal and the present-day manifestation of the neoliberal model propagated by the United States:

The United States'...privilege derives not from its similarities to the old European imperialist powers, but from its differences...Thomas Jefferson, the authors of the Federalist, and the other ideological founders of the United States were all inspired by the ancient imperial model; they believed they were creating on the other side of the Atlantic a new Empire with open, expanding frontiers, where power would be effectively distributed in networks. This imperial idea has survived and matured throughout the history of the United States constitution and has emerged now on a global scale in its fully realised form (2001: xiv).

In this passage, Hardt and Negri speculate that the colonial model of the European nations of the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and et al – which required the presence of a colonising nation state and the need for fixed physical boundaries, differs fundamentally from that of the vision that the Founding Fathers held for the United States' future role in global affairs. By utilising Michel Foucault's theory of power (1980), the authors explain that the current postcolonial form of hegemony championed by neoliberalism proliferates through a deterritorialised, decentred system of authority which, as the outcome of highly-organised

power networks, is able to ‘progressively incorporate the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers’ (ibid.: xii), a proposition that this thesis would agree with.

McClintock contends that these networks of power have been redistributed through a ‘revamped economic imperialism that has ensured the United States [and former European colonial powers] have become richer, while, with a tiny scattering of exceptions, their ex-colonies have become poorer’ (1995: 393). Such a claim would follow Edward Said’s argument on ‘economic imperialism’ as a phenomenon that gives the United States and other European governments and institutions ‘the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming’ (1994: xiii).

Fukuyama (1992), Donald Kagan (2008)<sup>12</sup> and Murray (2006) point out that neoliberalism continues to receive popular support among many economists, politicians, and of course, the general electorate. Wilson argues quite reasonably that ‘even though the vast majority of the citizenry...are rarely, if ever, what we would call capitalist in the strict sense, they appear to be clearly supportive of the form of [neoliberal] capitalism that has taken in their respective nation states’ (2002: 10). In the context of Wilson’s assertion, Murray writes that neoliberalism endures because it is ‘a philosophy for dealing with the world, a way of looking at the world. It can provide the philosophical and practical solutions for many mature Western political parties, for it provides the moral and practical answers to many aspects of politics’ (2006: xxxii).

It is necessary to draw attention to these perspectives at this early stage in order to highlight the extent to which initial readings on the scope of neoliberalism appear to illustrate a robustly self-assured ideal, unchallenged in its dominance in the global realm. However, there

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Kagan’s historian son Robert predicts that a curtailment of neoliberal economic policies and a conscious resolution from the United States to withdraw from the front line of global affairs under the Trump administration arouses the very real possibility of a third World War: ‘as the declining will and capacity of the United States and its allies to maintain the present world order meets the increasing desire and capacity of the revisionist powers to change it, we will reach the moment at which the existing order collapses and the world descends into a phase of brutal anarchy (2017: n.p.).

are a number of scholars (Hoogvelt 1997, Weaver-Hightower 2006, 2007, Mignolo 2011, Lazarus 2011, Vukovich 2013, Kalb 2013 and Rings 2016) who believe that since the turn of the twenty-first century, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that cracks are beginning to appear in the belief that the US-led neoliberal model is superior.

Weaver-Hightower for instance puts forward the idea that we see on-screen evidence in Hollywood film of the US fearing a decline in its global neoliberal dominance as a result of ‘its own global capitalistic excesses’ (2007: 214). This is certainly interesting in that such uncertainty would seem to subvert traditional ideas of self-confidence in US neoliberalism as a global socio-political model and also, betray concepts of rationality central to the civilised image of the Self in colonial discourse. The extent to which Weaver-Hightower’s argument may be discernible in the five features selected for analysis can be correlated with research question two of this thesis regarding the extent to which the films support the idea of a change in established neoliberal representations.

Prominent postcolonial scholar Walter Mignolo, while largely concurring with aspects of the above viewpoints,<sup>13</sup> asserts that this distinct construct of neoliberalism has entered a period of inexorable decline due to the growing influence of Eastern nations on the world economy and politics – something Kalb (2013) also agrees with. Mishra writes that recent events have:

...stunned political and media elites in the west into bewilderment and some truly desperate clichés. The extraordinary hegemonic power of their ideas had helped them escape radical examination when the world could still be presented as going America’s way. But their preferred image of the west – the idealised one in which they sought to remake the rest of the world – has been consistently challenged by many critics, left or right, in the west as well as the east (2014: n.p.).

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<sup>13</sup> Mignolo asserts that the concepts of colonialism and neoliberalism can be considered part of the same ‘mutually supportive and interdependent’ matrix of power (2011: xviii).

As issues of wealth inequality, economic stagnation and environmental degradation have become more apparent, neoliberalism certainly faces a period of unprecedented crisis, with growing calls for system change now invariably part of mainstream media discourse. The effectiveness of neoliberal economics for instance has been questioned in numerous areas of academia also, with leading economists Yanis Varoufakis (2015) and Thomas Piketty (2013) both providing convincing empirical arguments demonstrating that the current approach cannot continue in its current form without disastrous environmental and social consequences for vast numbers of the global population. In response to similar claims, moves toward sustainable management through the promotion of fair trade goods and bilateral regulatory agreements reflect genuine attempts to address systematic flaws and reform from within (see Wood et al 2006, Ghista 2004 and Porrit 2005).

In consideration of the above, it is not difficult to see that the scope of opinion on the state of neoliberalism today is quite disparate: while some are predicting its inevitable decline (Mignolo 2011, Chowdry and Nair 2004), others like Sorman (2008) and Zingales (2012) see US-led neoliberalism as the most effective socio-political model we have. Taking into account this wide range of opinion on the subject in media and academia, the degree to which an influential US economic and cultural medium in the shape of Hollywood cinema disseminates neoliberal constructs certainly deserves further attention in this study.

On the subject of power in Hollywood cinema, Ryan and Lenos write:

If the owning group do not control the political institutions directly, they exercise a great deal of influence over society by virtue of owning and controlling the means of distributing ideas in the society. They own the media, and they produce the movies (2012: 177).

In addition, Rings asserts that ‘directors, scriptwriters, and actors are not fully resistant to well-established cultural hierarchies and neocolonial perspectives that continue to shape contemporary forms of neoliberalism’ (2016: 1), implying that in many cases, the dissemination of neoliberal messages and propagation of certain discourses in cinema are the result of an inadvertent, rather than intentional, conviction to particular cognitive codes of superiority going back to the era of European empires.

Monaco reminds us that films are ‘circumscribed by certain economic realities’ and therefore ‘especially susceptible to the distortions caused by economic considerations’ (2000: 33). He goes on to write:

The elaborate economic infrastructure of film – the complex rules of production, distribution, and consumption that underlie the art – set strict limitations on filmmakers, a fact that is often ignored by critics. These economic factors, in turn, are related to certain political and psychological uses to which an art can be put (ibid.).<sup>14</sup>

This is an important point in the framework of this investigation: while many filmmakers often hold the best interests of their audience at heart, when we reflect upon the above points from Ryan and Lenos, Rings, and Monaco, it seems fair to suggest that Hollywood cinema can on occasion, inadvertently serve as an effective vehicle for the promotion of core US neoliberal values due to a number of outside economic, linguistic and social influences.<sup>15</sup> Whether it be an imagined representation of the ‘good times’ before the 2008 financial crisis as seen in Stone’s *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby* (2013) and Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013); or the questioning of the moral rationale underpinning the Iraq War – something that can be observed in Mendes’ *Jarhead* (2005),

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<sup>14</sup> Godawa also points out that ‘most movies are not wholly evil or wholly good. Most movies are a mixed bag of values and ideas, some good, some bad’ (2009: 26).

<sup>15</sup> An assertion put forward by Winn (2007), Scott (2000), Richardson (2010) also.



Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and Sheridan's *Brothers* (2009), film is a powerful means through which existing discursive principles are disseminated.

Richardson discusses Hollywood as an industry leader in global cinema in terms of impact and potential to reach a worldwide audience, and is of the opinion that 'no institution has been more successful at binding together economic and cultural dominance on a world stage than Hollywood' (2010: 1). Undoubtedly, when we look at prominent multi-million dollar grossing sci-fi films of the last twenty years or so – from Bay's *Armageddon* (1997) to Whedon's *Avengers* (2012) and Abrams' *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) – it is clear enough to see how many authors (McDowell 2014, Schlopp and Hill 2009) consider the industry itself a prominent medium that justifies and promotes neoliberalism and defend core US values (particularly when we take into account the revelations by Secker and Alford regarding government intervention on scripts).<sup>16</sup>

While other scholars such as Gormley (2005), Kord and Krimmer (2011) and Attebery and Hollinger (2013) regard Hollywood film more as a platform through which critiques of US foreign policy, institutional racism and socio-economic marginality can be disseminated to wider audiences through the 'safe house' of fictional storytelling, this study maintains the perspective that in-depth investigations of many features more often than not reveal some degree of tendency to disseminate discourses of US white superiority and neoliberalism.

However, this does not mean that Hollywood sci-fi can be categorised as intentionally promoting such discourses as Rings (2016), Monaco (2000) and Godawa (2009) have discussed: other factors such as the director and/or producer's background, the socio-political context

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<sup>16</sup> The wide scope of audiences that Hollywood is able to reach lends further advocacy to those who believe that the industry is an effective medium through which to promote US values, Shohat and Stam discuss how US cinema attempts to 'mediate, textualise, construct, imagine and valorise national identity' (2003: 11); Kaplan writes that Hollywood derives its *raison d'être* from the 'Western-centric' idea that 'part of [the industry's] imaginary self-construction is that it is not a national cinema but a universal or global one' (1997: 57). Examples of such techniques are noticeably apparent in films like Abrams' *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013) and Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996), which according to Davies (2005), both disseminate clear endorsements of the superiority of US identity and promote nationalist values.

during the production period (for example governmental tax relief, withdrawing certain monetary breaks, or perhaps simply because of economic difficulties) means that there is always more to consider.

Regardless, the importance of Hollywood as a profit-generating industry with the capability to reach a worldwide audience base is surely emphasized in the fact that it has often been afforded particular tax privileges (see Moore 2013) and remains a significant motivator for international tourism to California. Although its dominance of the worldwide film market is falling year on year, from January to December 2017 for example Hollywood's leading studios: Universal, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Warner Bros., Buena Vista and Sony/Columbia, still enjoyed a 74.6% share of global audiences (see *Box Office Mojo* 2017: n.p.).

In 2017 there were 724 features produced in Hollywood amounting to total worldwide grosses of \$10.7 billion (*Box Office Mojo* 2018a).<sup>17</sup> Science fiction contributed generously to that, with films like Reeves' *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017) and Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) grossing over \$100 million each. Johnson's *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) was the top earning picture of 2017, taking just over \$600 million in ticket receipts worldwide to date (ibid.).

Sci-fi's enduring popularity as a genre that is critical to Hollywood's financial success is highlighted in the fact that Edwards' *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), Abrams' *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens* (2015), and Lawrence's dystopian future action adventure *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 1* (2014) were the number one grossing features in their respective years of release. With these three works alone taking in over \$2.6 billion combined (*Box Office Mojo* 2018a), such astronomical figures bring attention to the sheer scale and economic capacity of Hollywood as an industry with the potential to disseminate particular messages to millions of spectators globally.

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<sup>17</sup> Top-grossing studio Universal made \$2.4 billion alone in 2016 (see Statista 2017).

Turning to the evolution of the genre itself, while the concepts that shaped it existed for centuries before, the term science fiction itself was first introduced by Hugo Gernsback in the 1920s to promote a particular form of literature he published in the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* (Geraghty 2009: 1). Initial works focused mainly on tales of alien invasion and interplanetary travel, however as sci-fi grew in popularity, so did the potential of the narratives. Indeed, the genre became so popular that the criteria with which we might traditionally classify science fiction in the first half of the twentieth century would later come to be incorporated into the horror, fantasy or adventure genre, with a 'sci-fi element' providing merely a backdrop.

To define what constitutes a sci-fi narrative from the perspective of this thesis, it is useful to observe Roberts' broad definition of key elements that must be evident within a story in order for it to be designated 'science fiction'; those components can be summarised as follows: aliens or alien encounters, a monster of some form, robots (either biological or mechanical) or genetic engineering of some kind, computers, advanced technology or virtual reality, time travel, alternative histories and/or futuristic utopias and dystopias (2006: 12).

Science fiction's fluidity with regards to allegorising particular socio-political issues is also well articulated by Kaveney, who frames the genre as:

A trope which at the beginning of the twentieth century was a way of discussing colonialism and racism had become by the middle of the century, a way of discussing the cold war, American spy paranoia and the fear of a levelling mass culture. At the century's end, its discourse had come to deal almost entirely with a purely personal autonomy and specifically, with embattled heteronormalcy (2005: 51).

Telotte regards sci-fi as a 'commentary that is dominated by a variety of direct and systematic ideological approaches' (2001: 40), whereas Rieder believes that the genre's strong link to anthropology articulates an 'anachronistic structure of difference (2008: 6)' that induces

a reflexive cogitation with the present. Within this paradigm, he proposes that current anxieties, fears and actions are reproduced in stories as consequences or sources of those subjects or issues, something this study would largely agree with.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, critical analyses of the aliens, monsters or robots in sci-fi stories have commented on how their roles often provide examples of Otherness ‘against which a representation of proper human subjectivity is established, interrogated and, on occasion, problematised’ (Cornea 2007: 176).

Before an in-depth investigation into the extent of the role that Hollywood science fiction plays in propagating notions of neoliberal superiority, it is first necessary to enhance the definition of neoliberalism within a wider conceptual framework in order to discover exactly which particular aspects of this value-system are being disseminated.

## ***1.2 Neoliberalism in a Colonial Milieu***

Most official definitions of colonialism focus upon the phenomenon in its physical form: the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* describes the practice of colonialism as something that usually involved ‘the transfer of population to a new territory, where the arrivals lived as permanent settlers while maintaining political allegiance to their country of origin’ (2012: n.p.). The *Oxford Dictionary* defines it as ‘the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically’ (2017: n.p.). However, Castree, Kitchin, and Rodgers’ classification of colonialism as ‘the control over one territory and its peoples by another, and the ideologies of superiority and racism often associated with such domination’ (2016: n.p.) best emphasizes the phenomenon from a neoliberal perspective in that it draws our attention to the centrality of the belief that the coloniser, or Self, was invariably intellectually, physically and racially superior to the colonised

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<sup>18</sup> Pilon adds that ‘there has always been a decidedly political side to science fiction, from the right-wing libertarianism of Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* (1959) to the reform liberalism of Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot* (1950) through to the futuristic socialism of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974)’ (1990: 39).

Other, a dynamic that many scholars believe fundamentally remains in line with contemporary notions of neoliberalism (Whelehan et al 1999, Rieder 2008, Kerslake 2007).

Since the publication of the founding works by Fanon (1963, 1967), Memmi (1965) and Césaire (1972), European colonialism's relationship to contemporary US global networks of power has been the subject of considerable discussion, with the majority of research contending varying degrees of a linkage between the two. Thomas believes that the 'persistence of colonial domination in international and interethnic relations is undeniable...frequent military assaults against third world states or groups within them or acts that aim to preserve spheres of influence show colonialism is still with us' (1996: 1). Shohat and Stam concur and state that colonialism and neoliberalism are intimately intertwined, with the latter embedding, taking for granted and 'normalising' the hierarchical power relations generated by colonialism (1994: 2).

Reflecting upon the comments of these scholars and the works of others such as Loomba (1998), Blaut (1993) Krishna (2008), Lazarus (2011) and Mignolo (2011), it becomes apparent that the 'post' in postcolonialism represents the continued relevance of the subject's impact in the neoliberal epoch, with the rise of the United States to the position of the world's dominant economic power after World War II seemingly allowing neoliberalism to continue where 'traditional' colonialism left off.

In order to develop this study's line of investigation, it is necessary to explore this link in more depth. Bennet and Antony elaborate upon the previous comments in the introduction and 1.1:

The new society of Europe and its American colonies had a different economic basis' that consisted in reinvesting the surplus in order to increase production. The first radical transformation in the domain of economy that allowed the West to reproduce its resources indefinitely is generally associated with colonialism. The second transformation, epistemological, is generally associated with the European Renaissance. They both fit

and correspond to the celebratory rhetoric of modernity...based on European achievements during the Renaissance (2011: 288).

This focus on the linkage between the 'economic' and the 'cultural' is crucial in understanding this association. In addition to Benet and Antony, the works of Said (1978, 1994), Blaut (1994) and Weber (1922)<sup>19</sup> follow similar lines of debate. Lazarus holds a relatively different interpretation and claims that the tendency for postcolonial scholars to concentrate upon the interconnectedness of colonial history with present-day neoliberal expansionism only allows the present construct of institutional racial and social discrimination to perpetuate 'unchallenged' (2011: 17).

He suggests that for postcolonial researchers to repeatedly employ the works of prominent writers like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha as a theoretical basis for contextualising contemporary phenomena such as the logic for the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions, we are distracted from the reality of an ongoing colonial circumstance. Central to Lazarus' work however remains the enduring assertion that colonialism remains with us and continues to occupy broad sections of contemporary society and geopolitics.

Mignolo's work on decolonality regards the term 'postcolonialism' as problematic when read in the context of Latin and South America's role in the neoliberal milieu (2007: 88). The author's claim is that, contrary to nations in Asia and Africa, 'the Americas' were originally conceived within the European notion of the Occident: the antithesis of the Orient – its inferior

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<sup>19</sup> Max Weber's theory of rationality introduced in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) has had a profound influence on the evolution of modern-day neoliberalism. Weber initially links the prevalence of rational thought with the advance of Protestantism in Germanic Europe: '...business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labour, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly protestant [as opposed to catholic]' (2001: 3). Here, Weber's scholarly objective was to expose how the link between religion and economics can work together to form an overarching ideology, theorising that capitalism is one aspect of an overall process of 'formal rationalisation': a mode of thought adherent to the attainment of goals as a 'means to an end' that came to influence thought in protestant countries from the seventeenth century onwards. Wilson wrote that 'Weber argued conclusively that this mode of rationality was one in which capitalism, science and the nation state's legal institutions shared' (2002: 97), thereby demonstrating how an all-encompassing belief-system could materialise.

Other (2012: 59). As such, Mignolo writes that it must be understood as part of an ‘extension of Europe’, or in other words, its ‘daughter’, who throughout the twentieth century, ‘grew up’ to replace European societies as the leader of the world order (ibid.). This means that postcolonial literature, which draws many of its analyses from seminal texts by Said (1978), Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1999) on the Orient, becomes ambiguous when applied to the question of the American continent’s role in neoliberal agency.

The views of Lazarus and Mignolo do however remain largely complimentary with mainstream postcolonial ideas despite their fundamental differences. Even so, this investigation will maintain a focus upon colonial (dis)continuities as part of the ‘West and Rest’ relationship discussed by prominent postcolonial scholars like Said (1978), Hall (1986), Shohat and Stam (1994), and Blaut (1993) who each consider contemporary Western European nations and more so, the United States, as proliferating discourses of intellectual, cultural, economic and social superiority of the rest of the world’s nations including Latin and South America.

This study would also closely follow Rieder (2008), Cornea (2007) and Krishna (2008) in associating colonialism with ‘the first radical transformation in the domain of economy that allowed the West to reproduce its resources indefinitely’ (see Bennet and Antony 2012: 288).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In discussion of colonialism’s success and the development of capitalism as the monetary model central to neoliberalism, Adam Smith is familiar to many as the ‘father of modern-day capitalism’ by virtue of his famous work widely known by its shortened title: *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Lesser acknowledged in popular discourse was that Smith’s polemical thesis for the framework of a capitalist society contained numerous concerns about the ethical nature of the system itself. Bassiry and Jones discuss the rationale behind the book; ‘Smith developed his model of a market driven, consumer-based economic system as an alternative to the political economy of the time – mercantilism, a system geared towards solidifying the power of the nation state by maximising exports to, and minimising imports from, competing states’ (1993: 622). Smith’s concerns regarding the capitalist model mainly concentrated upon what would be comprehensible today as market rigging, political lobbying and the ‘effect that the division of labour would have on the humanity of the working class’ (ibid.). He wrote extensively on these concerns in the book, for example in consideration of market manipulation, he asserted: ‘...as it is the power of exchanging that gives occasion to the division of labour, so the extent of this division must always be limited by the extent of the power, or, in other words, by the extent of the market’ (McCreadie 2009: 9). Smith was all too aware that capital accumulation by wealthy individuals and organisations could be used to influence political circles and advance personal interests. Such a concern has distinct resonance in the United States today for example where spending on congressional lobbying totaled \$3.15 billion in 2016 for instance (*OpenSecrets* 2017: n.p.). Frustrations with regard to government preference for corporate interest over that of the general public has been a central theme to Hollywood film over the years: going back to Cameron’s *Aliens* (1986), seen more recently in Trevorrow’s *Jurassic World* (2015), and observable of course in *Avatar*. These films provide good examples of stories where the general population are the victims of corporate profit-extracting agendas. In the film analysis section, a closer look at how and why this theme has proliferated in recent years is required.

The proliferation of the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch Empires not only opened up new territories for the exploitation of labour and resources, allowing colonialism to expand territorially, but it also provided European nations with the means to propagate values deemed superior to those they encountered. On the subject of what might be termed ‘cultural appropriation’, Mignolo (2011), Said (1979) and Shohat and Stam (1994, 2003) highlight the importance of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment to the development of colonialism. Shohat and Stam in particular propose that an imagined ‘Plato-to-NATO’ (2003: 8) discourse has ‘embedded, taken for granted and normalised the hierarchical power relations that were generated by colonialism’ (Shohat and Stam 1994: 2) – a phenomenon that Hardt and Negri (2000), Mignolo (2012), and Tiffin (1987) also discuss.

Blaut comments that the implementation of legal structures was critical to this process: ‘land law and property rights developed by lawyers and administrators in colonial corporations and colonial offices established the legal basis for expropriating land from colonised people’ (1993: 25). This study would add that educational institutions contributed to the development of a cultural dimension, safeguarding colonial interests and ensuring that, even after the colonisers had physically vacated their colony, influence remained (see Fanon 1963: 53).<sup>21</sup> Within the framework of this thesis, it will be interesting to explore how scenarios in which populations under the administrative control of colonisers are depicted in the selected features – and whether new developments with regard to the portrayal of the ‘traditional’ coloniser/colonised dynamic (Memmi 1965) can be observed. Certainly Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), and perhaps more so Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009): where millions of stranded aliens find themselves under the bureaucratic control of a private multinational military company, may provide some indication as to how far this is so. In the case of *District 9*, the national

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<sup>21</sup> This was famously observed by Frantz Fanon in his discussion of the ‘nationalist bourgeoisie’ (1963: 53), a group he claims exploited newly independent states’ natural resources and dominated the population in the same manner as the departed colonists.



government have absolved their responsibility of administering the ‘colonised aliens’ and have instead entrusted this to a private company – a narrative element undoubtedly absent from earlier colonial and sci-fi literature and film.

To now observe these ideas in context, the popularity of sci-fi literature at the height of colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century meant that it inevitably became an influential vehicle through which the cultures under the control of colonialism came to be ‘known’ (Said 1978: 2).<sup>22</sup> In selecting particular aspects of colonised peoples, authors drew upon these convoluted images to construct non-humans, often hostile aliens and/or monsters that then entered into popular fiction and shaped the mentalities – as well as the actual behaviour – of those people. This meant that the depictions of populations who lived under colonial rule came to unconsciously reflect a subjective imagination of colonial space, rather than the reality. Edward Said attempted to define this constructed image of the world beyond Europe as:

...almost a European invention, and has been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences...the Orient has helped to define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience (1978: 2).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> With regards to a contemporary neoliberal linkage to colonial-era sci-fi literature, Rieder (2008) and Geraghty (2008) have discussed the subject in-depth, with Rieder’s work in particular detailing claims of a relationship articulately. He identifies Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) as the earliest example of what would later become science fiction, as well as highlighting de Bergerac’s *Other Worlds: The Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon and Sun* (1656) as an instance of early sci-fi literature that ‘mocks, criticises, parodies and de-naturalises the cultural norms of the author’s French contemporaries’ (2008: 1). Sci-fi’s close links to evolutionary theory permeate nineteenth century stories, with Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872), Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (1887) and Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) prominent examples of this. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* in particular is highlighted by Boyle as an attempt by Wells to exploit Darwin’s theory in order to demonstrate ‘that the essentialist conception of identity in the Victorian sense was obsolete’ (2013: 3). Furthermore Parrinder discusses the impact of H.G. Wells and describes him as a ‘pivotal figure in the evolution of scientific romance into modern science fiction’ (1980: 10). The author goes on: ‘[Wells’] example has done as much to shape the genre as any other single literary influence’ (ibid.).

<sup>23</sup> Said further defined Orientalism as the process by which imperial power structures were maintained over former colonies as ‘a political vision of reality whose structure promoted a binary opposition between the familiar “us” and the strange “them”’ (in Loomba 1998: 47).

Building upon this idea, Blaut articulates a neoliberal notion of US/European society as a historical and geographical 'centre' within colonial discourse:

[It] eternally advances, progresses, modernises. The rest of the world advances more sluggishly, or stagnates: it is a 'traditional society'. Therefore, the world has a permanent geographical centre and a permanent periphery: an Inside and an Outside. Inside leads, Outside lags. Inside innovates, Outside imitates (1993: 1).

In early science fiction literature, the paradigm of racial, intellectual and social superiority of what Blaut would define as the 'inside' is often evident in the civilised, rational and patriarchal nature of many of the story's protagonists, which contrasts with the inferior, unchanging nature of the native Other, or 'outside'. Rings reminds us that literary representations such as this 'nurtured the assumption of [European] superiority within which differences between other cultures were reduced or negated in the image of one single inferior Other' (2011: 120). Hall (1986: 215) identifies four central recurring characteristics of this construct, which assist in outlining fundamental parameters of Otherness representation:

- 1) Idealisation
- 2) The projection of fantasies of desire and degradation.
- 3) The failure to recognise and respect difference.
- 4) The tendency to impose European categories and norms, to see difference through the modes of perception and representation of the West.<sup>24</sup>

With regard to point number four, Kerslake's useful analysis illustrates the function of the Other in the framework of neoliberal identity:

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<sup>24</sup> Bhabha summarises the representation of the Other as 'the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism that is a paradoxical mode of representation, it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition' (1994: 66).

The Other is not only crucial but is as important to our well-being as the notion of the Self. Both subjects (the Self/Other) define themselves through a mutual process of exclusion. In the demarcation of a place or centre for one culture or individual, there is an automatic displacement and marginalisation of all who stand outside (2007: 8ff.).

The representation of native peoples in well-known colonial-era novels like Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912), Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and Wells' *Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (1928) for example support the above scholars in their description of the Other. Each story clearly demonstrates a tendency to convey the idea of difference as 'lacking' based on European norms and concepts, evident through illustrations of unchanging inferiority and tendencies to exotify, feminise or/and infantilise native characters.

This is apparent in Doyle's *The Lost World* for instance when we compare the characters of Edward Malone, Lord John Roxton and Professors Challenger and Summerlee to the primitive ape men (Doda) and human (Accala) tribes that inhabit the South American plateau. The assumed validity of Summerlee et al as superior to the Other is realised when Roxton and Malone inadvertently save the Accalan prince from execution. The prince's (and the tribe's) willing acceptance of the supremacy of the protagonists – on account of their possession of guns (coded technological superiority) – is confirmed when they are forbidden to leave the plateau by the Accala in the hope that those guns will protect them from the ape men.<sup>25</sup>

Imagery of the colonial Other is observable in many examples of early popular literature: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)<sup>26</sup> and Chetwood's *The Voyages* (1769) for instance display a tendency to perpetuate a master/servant binary between the protagonists and the native

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<sup>25</sup> Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) highlights European interpretations of 'indigenous people in a natural world they barely understand' (Rieder 2008: 22) in that the inhabitants of Kukuanaaland are portrayed as being blissfully unaware of the abundance of riches and treasures that surround them within their kingdom, much like the tribes in *The Lost World*. Inauthentic depictions of the inhabitants of these exotic locations (further examples including the Eloi and Morlocks in Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and the cannibals in Wells' *Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (1928)) reinforced stereotypical ideas concerning the nature of those in colonised societies that had existed in the centuries after first contact.

<sup>26</sup> See Said (1991), Joyce (1964), and Rings (2011).

characters. Later, as other researchers such as Estrada (2014) and Edwards (2010) have also pointed out, this dichotomy can be seen in contemporary Hollywood sci-fi cinema: not least in the depiction of the Na'vi aliens in Cameron's *Avatar* and the 'prawns' in Blomkamp's *District 9*, but also in the inhabitants of the planet Nibiru in Abrams' *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013) and the 'ancient Mayan civilisation' featured in Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008).<sup>27</sup>

By exploring the conceptual linkage between colonialism and neoliberalism, this section of the chapter has considered prominent opinions of various scholars who have written on this subject, it has also examined the idea of Otherness and its relevance to notions of neoliberal superiority in literature. Nevertheless, while aspects of colonial mentalities<sup>28</sup> are still discernible in many aspects of society, the collapse of colonial empires after World War II – in conjunction with the rapid advancement in the industries of computer and aviation technology – saw the manifestation of different anxieties with regard to the direction of global capitalism, as well as increased questioning of the notion of its superiority. The next section will explore various scholarly perspectives of this change in response to propositions by a number of academics that it is possible to observe an adjustment in discursive representations around this period.

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<sup>27</sup> See Rings for his comparison of *Robinson Crusoe* with Zemeckis' *Cast Away* (2011: 126f.) and Trinder (2012) for an analysis of Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990), Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2003) and Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). See Memmi (1965), Desai and Nair (2005) and Nadel (1997) for in-depth discussions of Otherness representation.

<sup>28</sup> It is important to stress that there are different notions of colonialism and neoliberalism. While Spanish, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Belgian and British colonialism differ, there are often substantially different perspectives within those respective constructs themselves. Taking Spanish colonialism as an example, Christopher Columbus' and Bartolomé de las Casas' perspectives were not the same as those of Hernán Cortéz. Cortéz's views were not the same as those of Francisco Sepulveda and the Spanish Inquisition. In the context of this thesis, there are also fundamental differences in the way events like the Iraq War might lead to forms of representing and understanding the Other on screen.

### **1.3 Neoliberalism in a Postcolonial Context**

Hardt and Negri (2000), Krishna (2008), Shohat and Stam (2003) and Rieder believe that the new neoliberal world order ‘involved a recession of direct government control in favour of a more stable and enveloping world system of trade and finance’ (2008: 148). Nkrumah describes this as ‘neocolonialism’<sup>29</sup> – a process that can be defined less by its commitment to physical modes of domination in the mould of ‘traditional’ colonialism, but more as a method of cultural authority permeating ‘economic subordination, cultural imperialism and psychological anxiety’ (1965: 1).<sup>30</sup> Said also observed an acceleration in the development of hegemonic power around the same time, arguing that neocolonialism became central to neoliberalism: ‘[in our time], direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism lingers where it has always been; in ideological, economic, and social practices’ (1994: 9).<sup>31</sup>

1.2 drew attention to Bennet and Anthony’s discussion on two key aspects crucial to the advance of what could constitute the neoliberal model: the first was the development of capitalism, and the second, more important in the framework of this subchapter, was epistemology – ‘a term that was extended to encompass both science/knowledge and arts/meaning’ (2011: 6). While the propagation of this cultural hegemony had naturally been ongoing since the initiation of the first colonial settlements, this study concurs with Said, Rieder and Mignolo that an increased proliferation of this epistemological aspect can be discerned throughout the process of de-colonisation.

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<sup>29</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary* (2017) defines neocolonialism as: ‘the use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence other countries, especially former dependencies’. The *Collins Dictionary* (2017) describes it as: political control by an outside power of a country that is in theory sovereign and independent, especially through the domination of its economy.

<sup>30</sup> See Shankar’s *Decolonization* also (2001: 137).

<sup>31</sup> A question central to Frantz Fanon’s (1963, 1967) work also, neocolonialism can be suggested to have expanded its influence through particular societal mediums; not least the development of English as a global lingua franca thanks to colonialism, but also advances in the aviation and information technology (IT) industries in the United States.

Discussing the same subject, Blaut suggests the term ‘diffusionism’ for the same phenomenon, articulating it as something that ‘embraces the whole world and the whole of history, and forms a tight theory’ (1993: 42). He highlights academic textbooks as an example of an implicit epistemological medium that was employed to disseminate the superiority of neoliberal ideas and values. For example, Blaut theorises that as the rest of the world came to ‘acquaint’ itself with the West through globalisation after World War II, traditional forms of colonial representations of the Other were adjusted; ‘history textbooks began to exhibit another, more subtle, form of tunnel history; departing from the older pattern that dismissed those societies as stagnant and non-evolving’ (1993: 5).<sup>32</sup>

Although this study would follow Blaut’s assertion up to a point, it would be more accurate to claim that representations of Otherness inferiority in popular media, including Hollywood cinema, were adjusted after the Second World War to portray a more ‘sympathetic’ image. For instance, in consideration of earlier features like Silverstein’s *A Man Called Horse* (1970) and Wayne et al’s *The Green Berets* (1968), as well as in later sci-fi films such as Spielberg’s *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and Columbus’ *Bicentennial Man* (1999), certain character exchanges between the Self and Other may be described as displaying a more self-affirmational and/or learning tendency on behalf of the former, contrasting with the typical teaching experiences seen in older stories (see Rings 2011: 121).

The extent to which this is so could be suggested to correlate with the notion that belief in the superiority of neoliberal identity is not what it was in previous epochs. In how far this tendency is present in the chosen films will be investigated further in the film analysis section, however what is important to stress at this stage is that it appears there is evidence to claim that

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<sup>32</sup> See Bhabha (1993), Fanon (1963) and Loomba (1998).

there is a general change in representation of the Other in the neocolonial epoch, encouraging varying degrees of cultural exchange.

Said is of the opinion that the impact of colonialism meant that literature unavoidably became a medium for disseminating knowledge and exerting power (Foucault 1980) and ‘structuring attitudes and reference’ (1994: 53) over colonised cultures. He describes the field of literature itself as a consciously constructed discipline where only ‘the best that is thought and known’ (ibid.: 45) can be admitted:

Goethe's idea of *Worldliteratur* – a concept that waffled between the notion of ‘great books’ and a vague synthesis of *all* the world's literatures – was very important to professional scholars of comparative literature in the early twentieth century. Its practical meaning and operating ideology were that, so far as literature and culture were concerned, Europe led the way and was the main subject of interest ...certainly American practitioners and academic departments found this European pattern a congenial one to emulate...Academic work in comparative literature carried with it the notion that Europe and the United States together were the center of the world, not simply by virtue of their political positions, but also because their literatures were the ones most worth studying (ibid.: 45f.).

This power/knowledge dynamic emphasizes the importance of literature to neoliberal authority and discourse – particularly in the neocolonial epoch. Moreover, in the context of this study it can be argued that film operates in a similar manner, and is perhaps a more urgent medium of enquiry today when we consider Hollywood’s massive audience viewing figures and multi-billion dollar ticket receipts (see *Box Office Mojo* 2018a). As outlined in the introductory section, Hollywood’s sustained stylistic conception to particular themes and ideas

in popular box office features can ultimately mediate<sup>33</sup> audience understanding and attitudes to the same socio-cultural constructs of neoliberal superiority, neocolonial mentalities and capitalist ideologies that have been considered so far in this thesis.

While Cooke (2014) may be partially correct by pointing out that many prominent Hollywood features bring audience attention to relevant contemporary social issues of global warming (Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* 2004, Nolan's *Interstellar* 2014), racial discrimination (Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* 1992, Kaye's *American History X* 1998) and LGBT rights (Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* 2005, Van Sant's *Milk* 2008, Hooper's *The Danish Girl* 2015), in many cases preference for commercial entertainment over fact, evidence of direct governmental/military intervention on scripts (see Secker and Alford 2017), or tendencies toward melodramatic excess, often dilutes the potential for film to totally avoid adherence to established cultural, racial and gender hierarchies.

In the same way, as evidenced above, Hollywood cinema is in many aspects a diverse medium that encompasses a myriad of cultural backgrounds and ideas (see Monaco 2000),<sup>34</sup> but as Hardwick and Gillespie argue in their discussion of postcolonial literature, it is also very necessary 'to avoid an uncritical sense of relief that classical [and contemporary] texts have in recent years been recognised as a source of resistance and liberation as well as, or even rather than, suppression' (2007: 2). The same can be said for films, and consequently it is important that certain so-called liberal sci-fi features like Emmerich's *Independence Day Resurgence* (2016), Abrams' *Star Trek* (2009) and *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013), and The Wachowskis' *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003a, 2003b)<sup>35</sup> need to be scrutinised in much more detail by scholars and mainstream critics alike. In this way Prakash believes that the tendency to praise such

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<sup>33</sup> Belton also discerns narrative discourse in Hollywood stories, writing that '[Hollywood] is a consistent and coherent set of aesthetic and stylistic conventions that audience readily understand (2005: xxvi).

<sup>34</sup> Film as art is an aspect that should not be completely forgotten in this debate, particularly with regard to independence and relative freedom of art to express alternative perspectives (see Monaco 2000).

<sup>35</sup> In the context of race rights in the United States, McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and Daniels' *The Butler* (2013) also require in-depth scrutiny in the same manner.



works of cinema as cases that advance the cause of race, equality and gender rights ultimately serves to ‘highlight, dramatise, and celebrate a certain idea of history’ (perhaps a neoliberal version?) that ‘obscures the fundamental geographical political reality [of European and US neocolonialism] empowering the idea’ (1995: 25).<sup>36</sup>

Before we look in more depth at Hollywood in this context, it is important to examine actual examples of how this neocolonial mentality might manifest itself in a contemporary neoliberal framework. In a speech entitled *Why the Middle East Matters* that took place in London’s Bloomberg headquarters in April 2014, former United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair – a prominent ally in George W. Bush’s global War on Terror and leading proponent of neoliberalism, inadvertently demonstrated how sections of the ruling political and corporate elite continue to engage in neocolonial agendas in order to maintain control of areas or resources that are considered important to capital accumulation.

In front of representatives of some of the world’s largest corporations, the manner in which Blair justifies his argument makes the following extract of particular interest:

First and most obviously, it is still where a large part of the world's energy supplies are generated, and whatever the long term implications of the US energy revolution, the world's dependence on the Middle East is not going to disappear any time soon. In any event, [radical Islam] has a determining effect on the price of oil; and thus on the stability and working of the global economy. Underneath the turmoil and revolution of the past years is one very clear and unambiguous struggle: between those with a modern view of the Middle East, one of pluralistic societies and open economies, where the attitudes and patterns of globalisation are embraced; and, on the other side, those who want to impose an ideology born out of a belief that there is one proper religion and one proper view of

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<sup>36</sup> See Raphael-Hernandez (2012: 166).

it, and that this view should, exclusively, determine the nature of society and the political economy (Ahmed 2014: n.p.).

Since his resignation from government in 2009, Blair has remained active in private consulting and politics, particularly with regard to control of oil in the Middle East.<sup>37</sup> His (and that of key ally George W. Bush's when he was in office) public moral crusade against Islamism merely detracts from his ulterior motive of safeguarding neoliberal ideals and ensuring an Anglo-US presence in the region. Describing this agenda succinctly, Ahmed states that 'Blair's prescription for action in the Muslim world entails supporting policies which uphold "the principles of religious and open; rule-based economies" – essentially Western-friendly capitalism' (2014: n.p.). This study puts forward that Blair's neocolonial mentality and Ahmed's interpretation of his intentions of maintain neoliberal mentalities, can be discerned in this extract.

A number of Iraq war films like Mendes' *Jarhead* (2005), Sheridan's *Brothers* (2009) and Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014) produced after 9/11 – as well as sci-fi action features like Mostow's *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), Towhy's *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004) and Sommer's *G.I. Joe: Rise of the Cobra* (2009), can be suggested to tacitly endorse Blair and Bush's agenda despite their predominantly sympathetic soldier-centric storylines. With a strong focus on emotional characterisation (*Jarhead*, *American Sniper*) and violent war-context imagery (*Terminator 3*, *G.I. Joe*), each example draws attention away from the neocolonial underpin of the US presence in the Middle East.

It is worth stressing that such was the strength and public profile of Blair's alliance with Bush in the lead-up to, during, and after the Iraq War, that in some respects the profile of the former UK prime minister shapes contemporary Hollywood characterisations to some degree.

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<sup>37</sup> In the speech at Bloomberg, Blair also called for the West to set aside its differences with Russia and China in order to unite and focus on radical Islam, a danger he called 'the single biggest threat to peaceful coexistence in the world today' (*The Telegraph* 2014a).

Although the immediate neoliberal milieu is certainly more governed by US governmental positions and policies, recent Hollywood productions such as Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* (2010), Wiseman's *Total Recall* (2012) and McTiege's *V for Vendetta* (2005) each feature characters clearly loosely based on Blair, highlighting his influence.

Said suggests also that the ambitions of neoliberal proponents like Blair and Bush<sup>38</sup> are often validated by commentators that support and propagate long-existing structures of power generated by colonialism.<sup>39</sup> In an interview that discussed the impact of his controversial book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) twenty years after its publication, Francis Fukuyama demonstrates an example of neocolonialism by upholding ideas of US-led neoliberalism communicated in his original book:

...democracy, individualism and human rights are not universal, but reflections of culture rooted in Western Christendom, these values have grown beyond their origins - Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia – these values work for them, not because the US does it. [Liberal democratic capitalism] provides societies with a way to get rid of bad leaders; problems of corruption and bad governance are much easier to solve if you have a democracy (Fukuyama 2013: 32).

From the perspective of this study, Fukuyama's idealistic view of liberal democracy is fallacious to say the least because it seems to ignore Mishra's observation that 'the experiment with free market capitalism in Russia has entrenched a kleptocratic regime. Authoritarian leaders, anti-democratic backlashes and right-wing extremism define the politics of democratic India, Israel, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Turkey...racial hatred and bloody collisions ravage the world where liberal democracy and capitalism were expected to jointly reign' (2014: n.p.). In

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<sup>38</sup> See *The Guardian* (2003).

<sup>39</sup> On the same subject, Said also famously 'equated professors who support American foreign policy with the nineteenth century European intellectuals who propped up racist colonial empires' (see Desai and Nair 2005: 7).

considering the situations of these nations, Mishra does bring attention to an issue that would challenge neoliberal proponents like Fukuyama and Murray (2006).<sup>40</sup>

To explain, Fukuyama's interview does indeed acknowledge that certain problems exist in many countries that initially moved to adopt the democratic model, however the foundation of his argument in this particular interview was that no other form of government has emerged in the last twenty years that has challenged this. In this neoliberal context, it could be argued that Fukuyama fundamentally fails to see beyond the discursive boundaries of the ideal in that he does not choose to consider the historical context of the firmly embedded power structures that contributed to the adoption of this model of governance by many nations in the first instance (see Prakash 1995, Blaut 1993 and Raphael-Hernandez 2012).

In response to the claims that there has been a loss of confidence in the neoliberalism, Micklethwait and Wooldridge (2014), Galeano (1991), Porritt (2005) have commented on attempts to 'defend' the model in the same way that perhaps Fukuyama has done above;<sup>41</sup> Mishra writes that because of the failure of socialism, 'the elites primarily benefitting from global capitalism have had to devise new ideologies to make their dominance seem natural' (2014: n.p.).<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, supporters of contemporary neoliberalism (Friedman and Friedman 1980, Sorman 2008, Zingales 2012) quite reasonably point out that certain economic policies have 'lifted 800 million people out of poverty in the last two decades...as [people] become more prosperous, they live longer, their freedom of choice increases and their freedoms expand' (Sorman 2008: 2).

Reflecting upon this, when we consider the global role of prominent bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank

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<sup>40</sup> Mishra's opinion also supports a statement made by Micklethwait and Wooldridge in their book *The Fourth Revolution* (2014) that the twenty-first century has been a 'rotten one' for neoliberalism.

<sup>41</sup> See Wilson for further comments on the subject: 'the present illusory thinking that has resulted from this consequential tendency to see a causal relationship between capitalism as a system and the decline of the USSR has only served to reinforce the hyperbole of supporters of the [neoliberal] agenda' (2002: 34).

<sup>42</sup> See *BBC News* (2010) and *The Telegraph* (2014b).

and the United Nations (UN) however, once again the question of neocolonialism inevitably enters the debate.<sup>43</sup> The reason being that the influence that these institutions have over developing countries with regard to membership requirements concerning finance, debt management and legal transparency could be argued to ensure that former colonised nations continue to 'set the standard' for modernity and development on historical terms.

Concurring with the views of Mignolo (2011) and Shohat and Stam (1994), Carrasco (2011) is of the opinion that the IMF and the World Bank are prominent examples of institutions that are able to tacitly uphold neoliberal value structures that derive from historical notions of capitalism and colonialism. In this context, although Porritt's claim that these institutions undermine the democratic process (2005: 115) might be slightly simplistic; Ella and Stam's assertion that they have 'normalised the hierarchical power relations that were generated by colonialism' (2003: 8) is more appropriate when we observe the privilege that the former colonial powers of the United Kingdom and France, as well as the United States, hold as three of the five 'permanent' members of the United Nations Security Council with power of veto.

This power has been exercised on a number of occasions: firstly, in a clear display of imperial power by the aforementioned trio, the 1989 veto of the proposed UN condemnation of the US invasion of Panama (see Lewis 1989: n.p.),<sup>44</sup> and secondly in the numerous and repeated vetoes by the United States against UN proposals to sanction the state of Israel.<sup>45</sup> The veto power of the United States (and the support the nation receives from the United Kingdom in particular) could be suggested to demonstrate that the eminence of global power still resides within historical paradigms that are today manifest as the neoliberal world order.

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<sup>43</sup> See Shankar (2001) for a discussion of neocolonial 'economic subordination'.

<sup>44</sup> See also von Hippel (2000: xxvii).

<sup>45</sup> Of which there have been seventeen since 1990 (see United Nations 2018).

In the sphere of contemporary politics also, Brown (2006) and Murray (2006) argue that contemporary neoliberalism is mainly underpinned and propagated by the US neoconservative movement – as developed by political philosopher Leo Strauss (1953). Neoconservatism is described by Thompson as an ideal that ‘espouses hatred for economic equality, a renewed respect for institutional authority in politics as well as for the authority of tradition (i.e. religion) in culture and personal life and a crude brand of nationalism’ (2007: 9f.). On the same subject, Wilson (2002) provides an interesting comment on how the promotion of neoliberal economics is central to the wider dominating neoconservative agenda:

The neoconservative *raison d’être* is to provide ideological comfort to state agents regardless of system outcomes. It is no accident that what are alleged to be ‘lean and mean’ times, only the capital sector continues to grow. Public and social functions that cannot be privatised or ‘cut loose’ are subjected to more and more restrictions on eligibility, access and duration (2002: 40).<sup>46</sup>

In this context, Brown comments on how US president Barack Obama’s 2013 State of the Union speech<sup>47</sup> ‘repackaged neoliberalism as economic recovery’ (2015: 26), arguing that the contents of the address only serve to highlight how economic growth has become ‘the end and legitimisation of government’ (ibid.) in the contemporary epoch. The president’s speech might be suggested to illustrate Wilson’s point on how democracy in many nations has fundamentally been reshaped to ‘support, promote and defend capitals and capitalism’ (2002: 89).

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<sup>46</sup> Understandably, with so many personally affected by the crisis of 2008, attention turned toward how more wealthy members of society were being impacted by the downturn. What was discovered was that many had in fact seen their personal fortunes increase dramatically since the 1990s – even more sharply since 2008; in the United Kingdom alone, the last 20 years has seen the wealthiest 0.1 percent of the population grow their income nearly four times faster than the least well-off ninety percent (Elgot 2014: n.p.) and worldwide, some 95% of income gains have gone to the richest 1% since 2009 (Barro 2013: n.p.).

<sup>47</sup> Link to the full speech is available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/beltway/2013/02/12/full-text-president-obamas-2013-state-of-the-union-address/#547d2e7b354a> (Forbes 2013).

While this strong commitment to ensuring economic progress over social and environmental development may support the arguments of those who see confidence in the neoliberal model declining, many scholars (Žižek 2009, Fisher 2009, Waldman 2008, Spivak 1993) have commented on how US-led neoliberalism has been able to endure in the so-called ‘post-ideological’ era. Spivak writes how the neoliberal ‘crisis’ has been managed via a ‘reterritorialisation’ from the ‘centre’ to the ‘margin’ (1993: 68f); explaining how hegemonic identity today is associated not with outright deference to the prevailing model, but rather with the adoption of a critical distance to neoliberal elitism. Appadurai observed a similar adjustment: ‘the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models’ (1990: 6). Following on from Bennet and Antony, Hardt and Negri agree that:

Empire establishes no territorial centre of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentred and deterritorialising apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colours of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow (2000: xii).<sup>48</sup>

In each of these works, it is noticeable that the concept of distance is enacted to articulate a move away from a collective conviction to neoliberal ideals. Such an adjustment in mass media

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<sup>48</sup> Boyd et al (2001), O’Connor (1998) and Smith (1984) believe the problem of climate change provides a good example of how neoliberal elites have been able to take advantage of the damage that capitalist expansion has done to the environment and exploit the issue for further financial gain. Klein (2007) also introduces the idea of disaster capitalism and argues that since the 1970s, large corporations and governments have regularly manipulated large-scale environmental, political and economic disasters in order to push through exploitative neoliberal economic policies for the benefit of opening up new territories to the free market. Many films are also dedicated to the environmental problems faced in capitalist societies today and use this as a unique sales point; Reynolds’ *Waterworld* (1995), Miller’s *Happy Feet* (2007) and Emmerich’s *2012* (2009) provide good examples. Moreover, another of Emmerich’s work, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), can attribute its box office success to a marketing campaign based heavily around the audiences need to be environmentally aware.

portrayals is indeed a critical observation in the framework of this investigation into the extent to which there has been a loss of faith in the idea that neoliberal identity constructs are superior. It is something that demands to be explored in detail in the film analysis section to ascertain whether Hollywood demonstrates a inclination to disseminate aspects of the same tendency.

Reflecting upon these ideas, this section has considered a range of views from a number of scholars on the link between (neo)colonialism and neoliberalism – as well as opinions on the potential and limits of neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. With respect to the findings of this chapter, there is sufficient evidence to argue that there is a valid association between the two concepts. Furthermore, the debate with regard to whether neoliberalism is promulgated within global governmental and institutional circles is also very strong. The following two sections will investigate in how far this can be seen in Hollywood science fiction, and aims to explore discontinuities and continuities in the framework of neoliberal representations in selected popular films.

#### ***1.4 Neoliberal Patterns in Hollywood Science Fiction***

Whereas the previous section examined differing definitions and interpretations of neoliberalism and explored links between contemporary US-led neoliberalism and (neo)colonial patterns in mainstream media and political discourse, this part of the chapter seeks to investigate existing approaches to neoliberal representation in contemporary Hollywood science fiction cinema. Engaging case study analyses of commercially successful features such as Wyatt and Reeves' *Planet of the Apes* (2011, 2014, 2017) series, Bay's sci-fi thriller *The Island* (2005), and the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999), in this subchapter there is a focus on representative discontinuities in consideration of this thesis' second research question: to what extent has there been a change in established (neo)colonial and neoliberal presentations in Hollywood? In order to contextualise this, the above-mentioned post-1990s



Hollywood films will be compared with older sci-fi features from the 1950s to explore differences their respective dissemination of neoliberal discourses.

Returning briefly to Roberts' definition of key elements that must be evident within a story in order for it to be designated 'science fiction' (2006: 12),<sup>49</sup> what becomes immediately clear if we are to accept this classification is that the genre is in fact a broad one, easily able to integrate with other categories of storytelling. In the same way, it is possible to observe a similar fluidity in dominant discourses: 'with different factional stances taken at different periods, for different reasons' (see Kerslake 2007: 8). A comparison of Stoker's original *Dracula* (1897) novel and Ford Coppola's Hollywood remake *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) emphasizes this point well.

In their discussion of *Dracula*, Whelehan et al state that the story is 'haunted by imperialism' (1999: 5), interpreting Count Dracula as a typical alien invader from the East whose arrival to London is presented in a way that it threatens the supposedly idyllic lifestyle of the city's Victorian upper-class – the prominent readership of the novel.<sup>50</sup> However, produced nearly a century later (and released around the time of the Gulf War), Ford Coppola's film adaptation can be suggested to present a retrospective discursive reworking of Bram Stoker's original novel, containing anxieties with regard to an imagined threat to Christianity from Islam.<sup>51</sup> O'Flinn writes that in the film's opening, Dracula (Gary Oldman) is undoubtedly repositioned as 'a heroic outcast – a gallant defender of Christian civilisation against Islamic imperialism' (1999: 78). In this way, this study would add that the following extract from the movie script might support O'Flinn's position:

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<sup>49</sup> To reiterate, those components are as follows: aliens or alien encounters, a monster of some form, robots (either biological or mechanical) or genetic engineering of some kind, computers, advanced technology or virtual reality, time travel, alternative histories and/or futuristic utopias and dystopias (2006: 12).

<sup>50</sup> Whelehan et al also comment that both the novel and the film 'misogynistically represents female sexual desire as ultimately more dangerous than vampirism' (1999: 5), illustrating Mohanty's claim that there is an 'enduring patriarchal element critical to the hegemonic discourse both past and present' (1988: 62).

<sup>51</sup> See O'Flinn (1999).

The year 1462, Constantinople had fallen. Moslem Turks swept into Europe with a vast, superior force...striking at Romania, threatening all of Christendom. From Transylvania arose a Romanian knight...of the Sacred Order of the Dragon, known as Dracula.

The tacit implication here appears to be that a victory for ‘Islamic imperialism’ could have altered the earlier introduced ‘Plato-to-NATO’ (Shohat and Stam 2003: 8) linear notion of development associated with Orientalist (Said 1978) discourse. Furthermore, the glorification of the Dracula character draws attention to a clear discontinuity in a way that was absent from the original novel, also reconstructing a discourse of glorification associated with traditional colonialism (Zavala 1992).<sup>52</sup>

In *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, the reconstruction of Dracula in this role as a ‘defender of Western civilisation’ can be also suggested to manifest an example of what Scott terms a ‘politically reflective film’: one that includes a ‘clearly defined political character but one that does not peddle an obvious agenda’ (2011: 11). The development of such a tendency indicates a break with older portrayals, which on the whole presented the antagonist/protagonist dichotomy more in the form of a typical ‘good versus evil’ dynamic.<sup>53</sup>

Across genres today, Hollywood films exhibit a clear tendency to blur long-established simplistic binaries.<sup>54</sup> This is a formula that is certainly proving popular with audiences, who have embraced what they see as much-needed depth in the depiction of prominent characters

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<sup>52</sup> Anti-Islamic sentiment is also palpable in recent Hollywood features such as Forster’s *World War Z* (2013) in which Palestinians are arguably allegorised as zombies, relentlessly attempting to penetrate the ancient city walls of Jerusalem – a structure originally erected with the purpose of segregated the two religious populations.

<sup>53</sup> See Verhoeven’s *Total Recall* (1990) from the sci-fi genre and Lester’s *Commando* (1985) as a mainstream example of this.

<sup>54</sup> Abrams’ *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) highlights a good example of this break well when taking into account chief antagonist Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) as a character struggling to sever emotional connections to his father Han Solo (Harrison Ford). Driver himself has commented on Ren’s characterisation, stating that he tried ‘not to think of him as being bad, or evil, or a villain. Something that was more three-dimensional. He’s more dangerous and unpredictable, and morally justified in doing what he thinks is right’ (Breznican 2015: n.p). In Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) also we see ex-marine protagonist Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) at first playing the role of an ignorant ‘jarhead’ marine and then later overcoming his prejudices and rejecting his military background. The extent to which this is simply down to audience demand for more complex characterisation in Hollywood or something that runs slightly deeper will be investigated in more depth in the film analysis chapters.

(see Skipper 2014). The continued on-screen success of the *DC* and *Marvel* comic book series owe much to this, with post-Iraq invasion efforts such as Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) and Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013) praised by critics for their focus upon both the antagonists and protagonists' personal struggles and moral responsibilities – as well as driving home the consequences of their actions.

In the context of this study, Kellner discusses how *The Dark Knight* in particular can be read as a feature that portrays the 'morass and abyss of the Bush-Cheney era', displaying a 'deep pessimism of people plagued by their own economic and political elites and deadly enemies who want to destroy them' (2009: 11). The extent to which this formulaic break with past films can be correlated for example with Doran's comments on collective 'soul-searching' (2012: 3f)<sup>55</sup> *vis-à-vis* neoliberal identity in the United States after the Iraq invasion – or a reconsideration of the country's purported patriarchal role in world affairs – certainly warrants further investigation in the film analysis. Regardless, Kellner's proposition is an interesting one in that it may partially explain the rise in popularity of comic book movies in the last 10 or so years; furthermore it would support Kerslake's opinion on the fluidity of neoliberal representation in Hollywood.

As investigated in 1.2 and 1.3, contemporary representations of neoliberalism on screen can be claimed to be the result of the myriad of economic, social, environmental and political developments of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Hence, what is acceptable in terms of storytelling today is quite different to what was seen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For instance, in contrast to previous decades, Roberts writes that many science fiction stories from the 1950s 'mirror an increasing scepticism that science applied properly could solve all problems' (2006: 60); James concurs and believes that the further 'growth of science

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<sup>55</sup> See page 2.

fiction readership/viewership in the 1950s was inspired by worries about the future' (1994: 8).<sup>56</sup>

In the 1950s, rising ideological tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union – in conjunction with continuous testing of atom and hydrogen bombs in Nevada and the South Pacific, served to exacerbate fears on future global stability and a possible third World War, and as such these apprehensions inevitably made their way onto the big screen. Morse and Honda's *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956), Lourie's *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), Douglas' *Them!* (1954), Juran's *The Deadly Mantis* (1957) and Allen's *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1961) for example can be suggested to mirror societal apprehensions regarding the effects that nuclear radiation might have upon the environment; while Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) addressed concerns about entrusting those in power with the responsibility of safeguarding nuclear weapons, and the potential global disaster that could arise out of any miscommunication between war-mongering leaders. The possible correlation between actual issues and the consequent plotlines mirrored in science fiction is well presented by Sobchack who – further justifying this thesis' choice of the genre as most relative to answer its research questions – states that:

The sci-fi film is always historicised, grounded in its (and our) own earthly culture – in the economic, technological, political, social and linguistic present of its production, in the ideological structures that shape its visual and visible conceptions of time, space and social relations (1987: 302).

In the same context, changing gender roles and female sexual liberation in the US throughout the 1950s are prominent examples of this, with Juran's *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958)

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<sup>56</sup> James here holds the same opinion as Hardt and Negri (2000), Krishna (2008), and Rieder (2008) in writing that that these concerns were brought to the fore in response to anxieties *vis-à-vis* the crumbling of colonial empires and the future role that the United States would have in dictating the direction of the 'new world order'.

and Arnold's *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) prime illustrations of these themes manifesting themselves on screen.

The majority of 1950s science fiction appears however to be overwhelmingly fuelled by a political paranoia regarding the 'communist threat' and the increased domestic state surveillance that resulted from it in the United States. On this subject Geraghty writes that, upon reflection of Hollywood sci-fi produced in this decade, it seems the average American 'was convinced that what threatened their new domestic idyll was not the conformity imposed by the suburban dream but the external menace posed by the Soviet Union' (2009: 19).<sup>57</sup> Roberts also believes that 'an obsessive focusing by the US government on the Alien as the enemy during this period naturally fed directly through to sci-fi imaginations' (2006: 60).

The threat of communism is principally embodied in this period by the alien invasion story, in which the extra-terrestrial antagonists typically display a 'lack of feeling and an absence of individual characteristics' (Geraghty 2009: 20). It is also noticeable that some of decade's most popular sci-fi features like Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* (1951),<sup>58</sup> Arnold's *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) are set away from conventional film locations like New York and Los Angeles, so as to accentuate the supposed communist threat to the core of traditional 'American values'.

Furthermore, the fact that in each film the aliens also do not look physically different to humans and are (in the case of *The Puppet Masters* in particular) parasitic in nature, is significant in that this theme can be suggested to represent a manifestation of a paranoid anxiety regarding a potential communist infiltration of American society. The implication in *The Puppet Masters* is that anyone – even someone that you may trust – could be an alien, which

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<sup>57</sup> See Geraghty (2009: 20) for an analysis of American anti-communist propaganda films such as *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951) and *I Married a Communist* (1950).

<sup>58</sup> In literature, Robert Heinlein's work has consistently drawn upon themes of authoritarianism, with *Sixth Column* (1949) and *Starship Troopers* (1959) demonstrating prominent examples of stories that allegorise life in the United States under different hegemonic models.

constructs an implicit message to prompt vigilance amongst the general population regarding potential pro-communist activity. Analysing selected features, Geraghty believes that the ultimate goal of such anti-communist allegories in 1950s alien invasion movies was ‘conformity to the consumerist ideology’ (2009: 22). Such a declaration, in conjunction with the evidence presented here, moves us onto the next line of argumentation, which is to explore how contemporary science fiction differs from the 1950s and other epochs in a neoliberal context.<sup>59</sup>

Since the 1990s, an accelerated prevalence in the production of features that could be said to align with evidence of this supposed loss of confidence in neoliberalism can be detected, with the majority of sci-fi features produced from this time differing heavily in terms of representation with the 1950s pro-US portrayals discussed previously. Highlighting Bigelow’s *Strange Days* (1995) and Leonard’s *Virtuosity* (1995) as prominent examples, Cornea believes that a ‘fragmentation of traditional forms of subjectivity’ is discernible in a number of 1990s films, asserting that primarily ‘a sense of selfhood and identity once sutured to the nation was understood to be threatened’ (2007: 188).

The Wachowskis’ hugely popular *The Matrix* (1999) provides a useful case-in-point with regards to further investigating Cornea’s statement. The film ostensibly explores questions of artificial intelligence *vis-à-vis* rapid advancements in computer technology, however uncertainty regarding the proliferating neoliberalism and the effectiveness of capitalism underlie the narrative.

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<sup>59</sup> Throughout the 1970s, distinctly suppressed and miserable depictions of life under communist-style authoritarian regimes can be seen in Lucas’ *THX 1138* (1971), Allen’s *Sleeper* (1973) and, to an extent, the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983) for instance (see Belton 2005), providing a development with regard to themes evident in 1950s sci-fi. ‘Traditional’ communist imagery still continues to play a small part in sci-fi fiction today and has been noticeably revisited in Wimmer’s *Equilibrium* (2002) and Ehlinger Jr.’s *Flatland* (2007). Belton concludes however that from the 1990s, communists on the whole ‘began to function as traditional villains rather than genuine threats to national security’ (2005: 298) in the majority of Hollywood films in which they appeared.

Booker writes that the grey-green tinting of the camera lens (see figure 1.4.1) in *The Matrix* illustrates the ‘alienation of life under the capitalist system’ (2006: 256) to the viewer, destabilising traditional ideas that promote US neoliberalism as a superior socio-economic construct:

The Matrix, [Morpheus] explains, ‘is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to



**Figure 1.4.1:** Grey-green screen tinting in *The Matrix*.

blind you to the truth that you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell, or taste, or touch, a prison for your mind’. Neo merely has a vague sense that the world isn’t right and he doesn’t fit in. What he experiences, in fact, are the classic symptoms of alienation, long identified by critics of capitalism as one of the crucial consequences of life in a capitalist system. Marxist

critics in particular have argued that the capitalist system is nevertheless able to ensure the necessary cooperation with this economic system through a complex system of ideological illusions designed to convince individuals that the system serves them rather than the other way around (ibid.: 256).

This debate can be enhanced with a further suggestion the famous scene where Neo is ‘unplugged’ from the Matrix system for the first time further subverts popular assumptions of neoliberal supremacy. Here Morpheus offers Neo two pills: a blue one, which will erase his memory of their meeting and allow him to continue ‘living the lie’, and a red one that will show him ‘how deep the rabbit hole goes’.

In selecting the red pill and being able to see ‘the truth’ of the world around him, Neo is finally able to escape from the monotonous daily routine of his life as office worker Thomas Anderson, which encourages the audience (in a Marxist sense perhaps) also to reconsider their roles as workers in a wider capitalist framework. From a postmodern perspective *The Matrix* seems to draw attention to Mills’ discussion of the fluidity of discourse as a phenomenon that at once ‘transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’ (2003: 54).

Through a review of a wider corpus of post-90s Hollywood sci-fi, it becomes clear that comparable instances of ‘escape’ are noticeable in other popular films. In this context, particular attention needs to be given to the contrast between the inclusion of this element to many contemporary features and a general absence of it 1950s sci-fi films. The reason for this being that it best highlights the influence of how the various socio-political developments of the late twentieth century (that have been outlined in this thesis) influence Hollywood plotlines.

One popular picture that highlights this well is Michael Bay’s sci-fi thriller *The Island* (2005), which tells the story of a secret facility of clones whose human ‘sponsors’ have paid vast sums of money for genetically engineered doubles to act as surrogate parents or organ



donors. While the clones believe that the outside world is contaminated and unfit for human habitation, protagonist Lincoln Six Echo (Ewan McGregor) finds a moth in a ventilation shaft and, upon realising that he and the other clones are being lied to, decides to escape with friend Jordan Two Delta (Scarlett Johansson). In his analysis of the film, Baker writes:

In *Entertainment and Utopia*, his landmark article on the relation between popular cinema and modes of reception, Richard Dyer traces a continuity between a form of utopian longing, the image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide (2015: n.p.).



**Figure 1.4.2:** Fantasy escape in *The Island*

In *The Island*, the climactic scene in which Lincoln and Jordan liberate the other clones from the confines of the facility (see figure 1.4.2) – thereby escaping from a highly controlled life of uniformity and societal conformity, can be suggested to function in the same manner as Baker supposes, providing the audience with images of ‘something better to escape into’ (ibid.).

The potential development of some Hollywood (sci-fi) film stories to include the paradigm of fantasy escape as central to narratives highlights an example of a break with themes in past works, potentially signalling a significant change in the way that cinema has come to function in the contemporary epoch. The extent to which this can be linked to a declining belief in the superiority of neoliberalism certainly warrants deeper investigation as something that may be important to sustaining the belief that the model is a superior one to follow.

Kellner (2009), Doran (2012), Bonn (2010) and Eberwein (2009) have all discussed how public anger arising from the George W. Bush administration-led Iraq invasion brought about an important change in the way in which the US government has come to be portrayed in film. As Eberwein comments regarding current Hollywood cinema: ‘the general tone of films about Iraq (or US involvement in it) is despairing, totally the reverse of the loyal and enthusiastic support we see in films made during and about World War II’ (2009: 134). In this context, it may be worth analysing a few examples of Hollywood sci-fi to see if we can observe similar patterns of US government criticism comparable to those seen in war-themed films like Seftel’s *War, Inc.* (2008), Tanovic’s *Triage* (2009) and Hood’s *Rendition* (2007).

McTeigue’s *V for Vendetta* (2006) may provide a potential example of this; the film has garnered cult status since its release thanks to the cultural significance of the Guy Fawkes mask worn by protagonist V (Hugo Weaving) being appropriated by protestors who took part in the Occupy movement (2011) – as well as in the annual worldwide ‘million mask march’. In this way *V for Vendetta* has largely come to symbolise anti-elitism in Hollywood, writing for popular movie magazine *Cinema Blend*, Tyler for instance thought that the film was a real industry trailblazer in its dissemination of anti-neoliberal tendencies, exclaiming that ‘it’s shocking to see a film like this made in these times...you don’t expect this kind of bravery from corporate America, or a company like Warner Bros.’ (2006: n.p.). Indeed, in consideration

of the proposal that neoliberal elites have come to function as the primary antagonists in many Hollywood features today, the question one may pose is: why would corporate America be so ‘brave’?

*V for Vendetta*’s negative portrayal of political elites is primarily evident in the ruling Norsefire government who, after purposely staging a chemical weapons attack against their own people and blaming a group of religious extremists for the supposed terrorist act,<sup>60</sup> have achieved a landslide election victory. Protagonist V himself is the result of a secret government/military experiment aimed at creating a super soldier that went wrong, and many of the scientists and military figures that were involved in the experiments on him many years before are now senior figures in the Norsefire government.

V’s ruthless, systematic revenge mission against those individuals appears aimed at symbolically appeasing a frustrated audience, clearly angry at the handling of the War on Terror, widespread dishonesty, and for pursuing self-interest over the wellbeing of the people they are supposed to serve (see Kellner 2009, Bonn 2010). Other recent sci-fi efforts such as Lawrence’s *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013), Blomkamp’s *Elysium* (2013), Wiseman’s *Total Recall* (2012) and Trevorrow’s *Jurassic World* (2015) also follow *V for Vendetta* in their anti-government and anti-corporate criticisms. These examples would certainly appear to support Eberwein’s assertion (2009: 134) concerning changes in the discourse regarding portrayals of the US and other neoliberal governments in contemporary Hollywood cinema.

Finally, Thomas’ thesis on the shift to ‘Primitivist’ imagery in wider Hollywood cinema since the 1980s also deserves some scrutiny with regard to adjustments in neoliberal representation on screen. Described by the author as a narrative motif that ‘attributes exemplary

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<sup>60</sup> A theme that draws upon the popular 9/11 ‘inside job’ narrative (see Barkun 2013).

status to simple or archaic ways of life that re-values its rudimentary character as something to be upheld' (2005: 451), primitivism is often linked to the idea of Rousseau's noble savage (see Cranston 1991); however taking into account Baker's (2015) thesis on cinema as a mechanism of 'escape', the increase in 'primitivist' imagery on screen in conjunction with the prevalence of neoliberalism might be worth exploring in more detail. Highlighting Boorman's *The Emerald Forest* (1985), Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) as demonstrations of this tendency, Thomas asserts that the conventional leitmotif of innocent natives living in harmony with the natural environment around them, can be linked to a rejection of neoliberalism and continuing industrialisation (2005: 451).

Wyatt's *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) and Reeves' *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014) and *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017) appear to represent recent sci-fi examples of this tendency to promote the idea of a return to an imagined simplistic way of life that rejects the 'profit-at-all-cost' ethos of neoliberalism. The *Planet of the Apes* series' idealised depiction of a non-urbanised environment is played out through the apes who, upon their breakout from the primate facility in *Rise*, build a harmonious hunter-gatherer society in a redwood forest outside of San Francisco. While the apes are content and have developed a cohesive but simple treetop community, the human population on the other hand (90% of which have been wiped out by a deadly virus) are struggling to adapt to this new world in a devastated San Francisco without infrastructure, technology and order.

When we compare *Planet of the Apes* with Bernhard's *Unknown Island* (1948) and Herbert's *Dune* (1965) – two examples of older films in which untouched natural spaces are contrastingly depicted as places to fear (or at most avoid), potential for Thomas's proposal regarding primitivism and nature as a space of desire *vis-à-vis* its correlation to dissatisfaction with neoliberalism has some substance. As can be observed in figure 1.4.3, the village in *Dawn* and *War* is depicted as a harmonious peaceful place – far removed from the urban decay of

dystopian San Francisco. The sunset and cirrus cloud formations adds to the *mise-en-scène*. By promoting a nostalgic reconstruction of an imagined pre-industrial era, the *Planet of the Apes* series perhaps simultaneously illustrates an example of Baker's comments on 'utopian longing' (2015: n.p.) as a symptom of frustration with neoliberalism, and also romanticises the primitivist way of life over that of urban centres associated with capitalist industry. The extent to which Thomas's proposal is present in other films, and can furthermore be correlated to a wider loss of confidence in neoliberalism in cinema, needs to be investigated further in the film analysis chapters in order to ascertain whether it can be said to form part of a wider discourse that might work to destabilise neoliberal norms.

To summarise, the themes investigated in this section of the chapter – in conjunction with the film cases examined – demonstrate some examples of breaks with established Hollywood storytelling patterns in the way that they critique key aspects of the neoliberal model that were presented in 1.2 and 1.3. This includes approaches to romanticise an imagined pre-industrial era, as seen in the *Planet of the Apes* reboot series, and explicit castigations of



**Figure 1.4.3:** Natural harmony versus urban decay in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*.

US corporate and governmental elitism, which certainly draws attention to prominent discontinuities with Hollywood's historical tendency to advocate neoliberal ideas (see Langford 2005 and Kellner 2009: 1). This is of major interest for the in-depth film analysis section and will be investigated in detail in chapters' two to six. Of similar importance also is the continuity of (neo)colonial and neoliberal dichotomies in Hollywood cinemas, which is the topic of the next subchapter.

### ***1.5 Neoliberal Continuities in Hollywood Science Fiction***

This section examines a corpus of contemporary science fiction cinema to explore in how far Hollywood stabilises neoliberal patterns and (neo)colonial discourse. One of the central objectives of this thesis is to examine the extent to which there is a link between traditional colonialism and the elements that formulate neoliberal identity in Hollywood science fiction. 1.2 and 1.3 attempted to explore this association in general with a contextualisation of (neo)colonial discourse as a facet of contemporary neoliberalism, however, like 1.4, this section seeks to consider prominent scholarly perspectives and take into account selected filmic examples.

Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes* (1968), Tim Burton's 2001 remake of that film, and Roddenberry's *Star Trek* series (1979-present) will be investigated as features that to some extent uphold the cultural and ethnic hierarchies associated with (neo)colonial discourse. The Predator creature (played by Kevin Peter Hall) from John McTiernan's *Predator* (1987) and Stephen Hopkins' *Predator 2* (1990), and the Engineers in Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien Covenant* (2017) are explored as exotified film aliens that arguably serve to stabilise traditional notions of Otherness. Finally, this subchapter considers Emmerich's blockbuster *Independence Day* (1996), widely regarded to be a conservative film (Rogin 1998, Kaveney

2005), in the framework of Weaver-Hightower's idea that the US fears a decline in its own global neoliberal dominance (2007: 214).

Kaveney (2005), Cornea (2007), Kerslake (2007), Matthews (2007), Rieder (2008, 2011), Geraghty (2009) and Riegler (2016) all offer useful, detailed analyses on the various historical, conceptual and contemporary sci-fi perspectives present in cinema and literature. However Bukatman manages to highlight the significance of the genre in this neoliberal context in his discussion of science fiction's inexorable relationship to the socio-cultural history of the United States: 'sci-fi is considered a deeply American genre because of the constant attention paid to themes of science, technology nature run amok, alien invasion, and space exploration that correlate with particular moments in American history' (1999: 265).<sup>61</sup> Rieder also discusses sci-fi's link to colonialism:

Evolutionary theory and anthropology, both profoundly intertwined with colonial ideology and history, are especially important to early science fiction from the mid-nineteenth century on. The complex mixture of ideas about competition, adaptation, race, and destiny that was in part generated by evolutionary theory, and was in part an attempt to come to grips with – or to negate – its implications, forms a major part of the thematic material of early science fiction (2008: 15).

Rieder highlights the presence of Darwinist ideas in George Méliès' *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* (1902) – widely considered to be the first sci-fi movie – and the French director's follow-up films: *The Impossible Voyage* (1904) and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1907) (ibid.).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> It could be suggested that since the 1950s, science fiction has become *the* quintessential Hollywood film genre, exemplary in its ability to allegorise socio-cultural facets of US society, replacing the classic Western. In the context of Robert's definition (2006) of sci-fi, McAbee's *The American Astronaut* (2001), Whedon's *Serenity* (2005) and Favreau's *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011) demonstrate how the Western has been successfully incorporated into the sci-fi genre.

<sup>62</sup> Both of these films also fall under the description of a science fiction in consideration of Roberts' definition (2006: 12).

Other silent sci-fi features produced soon after such as Searle Dawley's adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1910), Robertson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920) and Hoyt's *The Lost World* (1925) also draw upon evolutionary theory, as well as motifs of Otherness (Hall 1986, Rings 2016).

Despite keen viewership in the early twentieth century, it was from the 1930s however that the sci-fi began to enter its 30-year 'golden age' (see Rieder 2008) as a film genre. Popular science fiction writer Robert Silverberg underlines this claim with a discussion of the regularity in which science fiction movies were produced in Hollywood at the beginning of this period – no less than thirty-nine in the decade 1930 and 1940 (2012: n.p.). With a general surge in the production of films – along with a heightened audience interest in sci-fi as a genre, an increase in what could be deemed 'exotic' imagery, comparable with notions of colonial discourse, was noticeably widespread from the 1930s onwards;<sup>63</sup> with Bernhard's *Unknown Island* (1948), Beebe and Taylor's *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (1940) and Roach's *One Million B.C.* (1940) in particular exemplifying this.

While Burnstein and Studlar argue that the increase in this imagery functioned in part to take attention away from economic troubles brought on by the Great Depression (1997: 3),<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> From the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of European colonialism until the end of World War II, Hollywood produced a great number of features set in Africa and the Middle. Gasnier's silent movie *Kismet* (1920), adapted from the 1911 play of the same name, Walsh's *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924) and Badger's *She's a Sheik* (1927) are notable examples of early silent movies that depict images of the Middle East in its essential Orientalist form. The fascination with screen images of the Orient continued into the 1950s and 1960s with Lander's *Jungle Jim in the Forbidden Land* (1952) and Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963) noteworthy examples. The imagery in these films too is distinctly Orientalist in the context of Edward Said's (1979) understanding; Elizabeth Taylor's exotic appearance as the Pharaoh Queen and the mutant giants of the jungle in *Forbidden Land* for instance supports Said's idea concerning the Orient as land of 'exotic beings' and 'remarkable experiences' (1979: 2). In conjunction with the economic troubles of the 1930s brought on by the Great Depression, LeRoy's *The Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) and Capra's *American Madness* (1932) explore the role of capitalism in US society. Butler's *Just Imagine* (1930), a film that depicts dystopian visions of a heavily industrialised, overcrowded 1980s New York, illustrates this well also and demonstrates an early example of a film that addresses concerns with regard to the direction of neoliberalism. Stone's *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), Wells' *The Company Men* (2010) and Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* (2012) represent something similar in the context of the 2008 economic crisis.

<sup>64</sup> Comparable exotic imagery can be seen in contemporary sci-fi features like Shyamalan's *After Earth* (2013) and Antal's *Predators* (2010), as well as the 'Amazonian moon' Pandora in Cameron's *Avatar* and twenty-fourth century Hawaii in the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas*.



Shohat and Stam are of the opinion that this could be down to the role of cinema as the ‘epistemological mediator between the spectator and that of the cultures represented on screen’ (1994: 93), shaping assumptions of Otherness and reinforcing ideas of colonial discourse disseminated in earlier literature.<sup>65</sup>

What Blaut labelled ‘stagnant and non-evolving’ images of the traditional Otherness representation (1993: 1), can be discerned in features like Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Invisible Man* (1933), Hillyer’s *The Invisible Ray* (1936) and Sherman’s *The Return of Doctor X* (1939). However, there is evidence that this eventually made way for more sympathetic portrayals of the Other from the 1960s onwards, in line with the same twentieth century socio-economic changes that were discussed in 1.3. Schaffner’s *Planet of the Apes* (1968), Haskin’s *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964) and Pal’s *The Time Machine* (1960) – in addition to Spielberg’s later hits *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Batteries Not Included* (1987), present the Other more as an entity from which the Self could learn from, rather than teach, breaking with older film patterns.

However, despite encouraging shifts towards criticisms of the more unscrupulous aspects of US neoliberalism such as hegemonic domination, racial superiority and traditional colonialism, uncharacteristic depictions of the Other as inferior, exotic and irrational, often stabilise these portrayals, highlighting continuities with typical neoliberal norms and patterns. Schaffner’s *Planet of the Apes* (1968), a feature that many would argue criticises the nuclear arms race (see Holloway 2016), illustrates a prominent example of this. Greene’s postcolonial analysis reads Charlton Heston’s George Taylor to be an icon of ‘Western imperial privilege

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<sup>65</sup> Sci-fi comic books such as *Buck Rogers* (1929-1957), *Flash Gordon* (1936-1949) and *Superman* (1938) were filled with comparable Orientalist settings. Demand was high for images of curious locations both on and off Earth as is evident in *Flash Gordon on Planet Mongo* (1934) and *The Adventures of Tin Tin: Explorers on the Moon* (1954). As discussed by Horton (2007), images of space and other worlds in such comics have been shown to reflect subconscious portrayal of the colonial imagination and more so, distinct articulations of racial difference *vis-à-vis* the superiority of the white coloniser. Singer believes that comic books ‘rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances. This system of visual typology combined with the superhero genre’s long history of excluding, trivialising, or “tokenising” minorities to create numerous minority superheroes who are marked purely for their race’ (2002: 26).

fighting a last stand battle to defend a fort or outpost of Western civilisation against the onslaught of hordes of non-Western, dark-skinned barbarians' (1998: 41), something that certainly draws attention to a possible ethnic hierarchy in the narrative.

Greene's argument can also be applied to Tim Burton's 2001 remake, in which clear racial distinctions and hierarchies can be observed within the ape population themselves. In this film, it can be observed that the bruising, savage ape guards are darker in complexion for instance and clearly designated as 'black'. On the same subject, Cornea adds that highly rational 'Jewish apes' can be identified, along with 'paler' apes (coded white European), who are much more sympathetic to the cause of white protagonist Mark Wahlberg (2007: 181).

Indeed, Wahlberg's character Leo Davidson in particular can be suggested to embody the archetypal characteristics of the (neo)coloniser as discussed by Robinson: someone who unlike his 'predecessors' (Defoe's Crusoe or Chetwood's Captain Falconer for instance), is uninterested in permanently settling and controlling the new space in which he finds himself but is still concerned with 'shaping the self-concepts, values and personalities' (1997: 22) of those he encounters. The protagonist's patriarchal masculinity, assertiveness and leadership skills in engineering a human rebellion against the apes can be suggested to encapsulate this.

Analysing Roddenberry's *Star Trek* motion pictures (1979-present), one can also observe the same racial 'pecking order'. Roberts discusses the desire of series creator Gene Roddenberry to present 'a future in which discrimination on the grounds of race or gender was a thing of the past' (2006: 102), illustrating this utopian vision of future racial harmony through the portrayal of the Starship Enterprise's multiracial crew. To an extent this was achieved, but from a postcolonial perspective the diversity of the group could be argued to be invalidated by the designation of a white male of traditional colonial privilege as the ship's Captain James T. Kirk (originally played by William Shatner and more recently by Chris Pine).

In this way, the figure of Kirk could be said to represent a manifestation of a New World explorer, relaying his experiences back to the viewer through the medium of the ‘captain’s log’. Furthermore, his indulgence in colonial fantasy – apparent in the numerous sexual encounters he has with the alien women he meets – affirms a coloniser mentality (Hall 1986: 215).<sup>66</sup> In both *The Planet of the Apes* films and *Star Trek*, we see an example of this thesis’ third research question: which basic neoliberal and (neo)colonial binaries are disseminated in Hollywood, being justified. This highlights the need to investigate this tendency in more depth in the main film analysis section (chapters’ two to six).

While there exists a substantial liberal movement among Hollywood filmmakers (see Dickenson 2005, Prindle and Endersby 1993) – arguably encapsulated in Roddenberry’s *Star Trek* series, Quinn (2012) reminds us also of the industry’s long-standing conservative association. In his article *Closing Doors: Hollywood, Affirmative Action, and the Revitalization of Racial Conservative Politics*, the author discusses Hollywood’s marginalisation of African Americans and its relationship to reinforcing ideas of stereotypes and Otherness (2012: 477). Growing social tensions in the decades after the Civil Rights Movement meant that race – particularly blackness as a threat to white identity, is a prominent motif in many Hollywood films from the mid-1960s. On this subject, Roberts describes Scott’s *Alien* (1979) as ‘an expression of white, middle-class fear at the potential distrust of an alienated black underclass’ (2006: 95).<sup>67</sup> In this same milieu, Roberts also gives an interesting analysis of McTiernan’s

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<sup>66</sup> Regarding the show’s notion of the United Federation of Planets, Donawerth detects ambivalent traces of colonial guilt and a rejection of neoliberal power structures: ‘directives and similar injunctions against contact and interference with more primitive, planet-bound civilisations [established by the UFP] are surely rooted in [colonial] regrets about the nature of first contact’ (2013: 73). It can be claimed that the liberal-utopian directives and laws instituted by the Federation and the *Star Trek* universe’s operation within a moneyless ‘New World Economy’ are founded in a dissatisfaction by Roddenberry (whose libertarian political views were well documented according to Powell (2015)), with the ineffectiveness of intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations.

<sup>67</sup> Assuming Roberts is right, that supposed fear is intensified in James Cameron’s sequel *Aliens* (1986) where the alien/black underclass population multiplies, overruns and destroys a human colony. Apprehension appears to have been allayed however as in Fincher’s *Alien 3* (1992), the alien is confined to a prison.

*Predator* (1987) and Hopkin's *Predator 2* (1990) with regard to Otherness. It is an examination which, given the context, is worth quoting in full:

The predator's dreadlocks are a clear enough signifier of blackness. The coding is made more explicit in the sequel where the action relocates from the jungle to the urban battlefield of Los Angeles, another, more politically loaded location for white fears of black violence. In *Predator*, the alien is killed by Aryan *uberman* Arnold Schwarzenegger, in the second, the casting is more ingenious: black actor Danny Glover pitted against black-man-as-alien, precisely in the scene where black-on-black violence in contemporary America is at its most acute (2006: 95) (see figure 1.5.1).

Emerging in the same period as *Predator 2*'s production, Cornea observes 'the blurring of national borders...[wherein] under these conditions it became harder to formulate clear-cut divisions between the Self and the Other. In other words...the destabilising [of] ideas of identity built upon essentialist notions of race and ethnic allegiances' (2007: 188). Assuming that this statement is accurate, it appears that the engenderment of a focus on the importance



**Figure 1.5.1:** Signified blackness in the Predator monster.

of ethnic identity – a central theme to *Predator 2* – and a tendency to revert to constructs of Otherness were notable outcomes of this perceived decline in the strength of the nation state.<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps in response, we can detect continuing examples of Otherness in a number of contemporary high-profile Hollywood films, with Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien Covenant* (2017) representing this. *Prometheus* in particular was heavily promoted by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox as both a prequel to the *Aliens* franchise and a film that would broach wider questions as to the origins of the human species, however it disappointed fans and media alike in the manner the narrative reverted to typical genre fare (see Chattaway 2012: 21) and used its association to the *Aliens* films as merely a selling point.

In a postcolonial context, *Screen Soup Film and Television* writes: 'it is clear by what Scott says in the book *Prometheus: The Art of the Film* (2012) that the film does focus on power relations between the coloniser and the colonised' (2014: n.p.). In this case, the narrative attempts to invert the typical coloniser/colonised binary, with the human race ostensibly taking the role of colonised subjects and the technologically-advanced alien Engineers occupying the part of the malevolent colonisers. This role-reversal of the long established colonial dichotomy in *Prometheus* was surely an attempt by Scott and the filmmakers to encourage audiences to reflect upon the realities of Empire. *Screen Soup Film and Television* articulates the film's endeavours to achieve this:

In the opening sequence of the film, a tall, slender, humanoid alien can be seen on a planet that resembles primordial Earth from a godlike perspective. The camera angle in

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<sup>68</sup> *Predator 2*, set against the backdrop of a turf war between rival Jamaican and Colombian gangs, is at pains to depict a violent segregated Los Angeles. Other groups highlighted in the movie include the overworked, mainly Latino/black populated Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the predominantly white special government task force led by Peter Keyes (Gary Busey) and of course, the Predator himself. Each faction exists in violent harmony with the other as director Hopkin attempts to exaggerate anxieties on racial division within the city.

this scene symbolises the godlike power that the colonisers had over the new lands that they've conquered (ibid.: n.p.).

In the scene in question, the shot of the Engineer at the forefront of the frame with the vast landscape and the raging torrent of the nearby waterfall behind him emphasizes the point that the *Screen Soup* review is attempting to articulate. The angle in which the shot is constructed works to make the viewer feel inferior to the alien being – and in doing so he or she supposedly assumes the role of the colonised subject.

While some argue that the intention to reverse the role of viewer to position of the 'colonised' was accomplished (see Backe 2016 for instance), the subsequent self-sacrificial act in which the Engineer consumes a mysterious black liquid can be argued to largely invalidate any critique that the film breaks with established colonial patterns. Instead it evokes imagery of 'primitive beliefs' and 'mysterious' (Bhabha 1994: 73) rituals supposedly practiced by the 'savage' Other. In this case, *Prometheus* allegorises the practice of 'witchcraft', which is discussed by Mavhungu in its colonial context:

The study of witchcraft has its roots in the nineteenth century. During this period, anthropologists took witchcraft in Africa for evidence of 'primitive' or 'pre-logical' thinking, for something Europeans themselves had, in times past, endured, but had now outgrown. African witchcraft thus served as an unmistakable marker of the 'primitive Other' (2012: 12).

Further cognitive linkage to Otherness in the scene can be observed in the large robe worn by the Engineer, with the garment working to historicise the character and accentuate the notion of difference (as lacking) in comparison with the Self (see figure 1.5.2). While *Prometheus* undoubtedly seeks to confront colonialism and highlight the traumatic relationship between the coloniser and colonised, it is unable to go beyond long-established limits of the

depiction of the Other as fundamentally inferior in comparison with the civilised Self – in this case it is an inability to move past stagnant traditions. This again lends justification to the decision to include and explore research question three in this thesis’ main film analysis, identifying as it does that Otherness, a central facet of (neo)colonial discourse, is on occasion reconstituted in some major Hollywood films to reinforce neoliberal norms.



**Figure 1.5.2:** Implied Otherness in *Prometheus*’ ‘Engineers’.

Finally, 1.1 considered Weaver-Hightower’s view that, contrary to the idea that neoliberalism has entered a state of inexorable decline (Hoogvelt 1997, Mignolo 2011, Kalb 2013, Vukovich 2013), some Hollywood features, like Zemeckis’ *Cast Away* (2000) for example, can be said to encapsulate motifs of an irrational, imagined fear that US global dominance is deteriorating as a result of ‘its own capitalistic excesses’ (2007: 214). If one accommodates this, then the extent to which such a phenomenon may destabilise traditional ideas of neoliberal identity *vis-à-vis* masculine patriarchy and global ‘Americanisation’ (Pinder 2010), also becomes important in the framework of this investigation.

In this way, Emmerich's ultra-patriotic alien invasion blockbuster *Independence Day* (1996)<sup>69</sup> can be presented as an example of a film that vigorously promotes a contrary view that US neoliberalism is decline, endorsing as it does, unashamed pro-American propaganda. Mair believes that 'there is no attempt at irony or concealment of the political championing of Western, liberal, democratic modernity [in the film], which it presents as the apex of American culture' (1998: 982). Indeed, we see that the alien Other is portrayed as the embodiment of pure evil in their intentions and actions, their destructive agenda is set against the benevolent goodness of the United States and its heroic military. *Independence Day* upholds US liberal democracy as the ultimate bastion of universal peace and portrays America as the saviour of mankind.

The film may at first glance also appear to champion multiculturalism in depicting members of the United States' prominent ethnic groups coming together to fight off the dangerous alien menace, however in reality it draws upon clichéd stereotypes of black muscle and Jewish brain power in its presentation of Steven Hiller (played by Will Smith) and David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum) respectively. The final counteroffensive is overseen by the US president himself, former US air force pilot and epitome of white masculinity Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman), a character who confirms *Independence Day*'s promotion of a white male-led neoliberal cultural and ethnic hierarchy.

In a similar milieu, Santerre-Hobby reflects on the film as highlighting the 'US Christian Right's anxiety regarding female sexuality and women's desire to control their own destinies through financial independence, birth control, and abortion' (2000: 51).<sup>70</sup> In this way,

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<sup>69</sup> In response to its blatant conservative position, *Independence Day* is a film that has been widely discussed in academic circles. Kaveney believes that the 'president-as-man-of-the-people' populism of *Independence Day* was part of the cultural phenomena that led to the election of George W. Bush as president of the United States (2005: 46) – an interesting point in itself. King alludes to a psychoanalytic examination of the film by stating that 'the engagement with the alien invaders offers a possibility of escape from the mess, tedium and corruption of daily life in late twentieth century America' (2008: 19).

<sup>70</sup> Donaldson's *Species* (1995) could be also suggested to display similar themes in the way it accentuates the dangers of unrestrained female sexual liberation.



*Independence Day*'s repeated use of sexual imagery in the form of the vagina shaped alien mothership engaging in the sheer unsympathetic destruction of those phallic symbols of US capitalism: the White House (coded American political power), the Empire State Building (exemplar of American capitalist finance), and US Capitol (representative of rational law) would seem to lend support Santerre-Hobby's position. This invariable *vagina dentata*<sup>71</sup> motif in *Independence Day* demonstrates the reconstruction of male-centric storytelling narratives central to colonial literature and chronicles of New World encounters in a major Hollywood motion picture.<sup>72</sup>

The filmic examples discussed in this section of the chapter can be suggested to follow the same pattern as *Independence Day* in that they to some extent, normalise neoliberal and (neo)colonial patterns. At this stage, after a comprehensive discussion of the concepts relative to this study, an examination of discontinuities in neoliberal representations in Hollywood sci-fi – as well as an inquiry into the extent to which there are continuities that many contemporary movies share with older features, it is now time to begin the detailed investigation of the five films selected for in-depth study in this thesis.

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<sup>71</sup> Latin word literally meaning 'vagina with teeth'. This is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as: 'the motif of a vagina with teeth, occurring in folklore and fantasy and said to symbolize male fears of castration or the dangers of sexual intercourse' (2018: n.p.).

<sup>72</sup> *Independence Day* was the highest grossing Hollywood film of 1996 by well over \$300 million (*Box Office Mojo* 2018b: n.p.)

## **2. James Cameron's Avatar**

### **2.1 Preliminary Remarks**

The first of this thesis' film analyses explores the role of key characters and scenes in James Cameron's hugely popular science fiction feature *Avatar* (2009). The film has been selected for in-depth analysis primarily because of its massive commercial success, but also because of the praise it received from a number of prominent mainstream critics for its anti-neoliberal message. This chapter aims to explore in how far *Avatar* 1) critically interrogates the neoliberal and neocolonial constructs that shape twenty-first century science fiction and 2) ultimately returns to basic capitalist as well as colonial binaries, which might include the development of contemporary neoliberal ideals.

Before any investigation can begin, it is important to briefly examine the existing body of literature on the film. Released in December 2009, *Avatar* is one of the most expensive movies ever made and, with box office sales of \$2.8 billion worldwide (*Box Office Mojo* 2015a), it is the highest grossing picture of all time. Upon release, *Avatar* was praised for its pro-green and anti-neoliberal agenda by mainstream critics (Cohen 2009, Gardiner 2009, Ebert 2009); even socialist Bolivian president Evo Morales was impressed, describing the film as a 'profound show of resistance to capitalism and the struggle for the defence of nature' (*Huffington Post* 2010). Cohen agreed with president Morales, claiming that the film 'is firmly in the anti-imperialist canon, a 22<sup>nd</sup> century version of India versus the Raj, or Latin America versus United Fruit' (2009: 22).

Praise for *Avatar*'s anti-neoliberal message was the overarching consensus. Gardiner went as far as to say that it is 'the most expensive piece of anti-American propaganda ever made...a political work of art with a strong anti-Western message' (2009: n.p.). The late Roger Ebert labelled *Avatar* a 'masterpiece', and remarked that the film has a 'flat-out Green and anti-

war message' (2009: n.p.). As a result of its mainstream success, *Avatar* has also been the subject of enormous scholarly debate from a number of philosophical (Teays 2012, Hillis 2009), postcolonial (Veracini 2011, James and Ue 2011, Adamson 2012), and postmodern anti-capitalist perspectives (Žižek 2010, Elsaesser 2011, Rosenfield 2010, Jones 2010). While most film reviews tend to stress anti-neoliberal themes in *Avatar*, scholarly articles are much more critical of that message: Burgchardt and Ott for instance bring attention to the glorification of imperialism and the objectification of the female body in the story (2011: n.p.). The authors claim that although *Avatar* ostensibly disseminates a progressive message of coexistence with nature and a promotion of peace, below the surface the story operates with assumptions about a 'natural' hierarchical order (ibid.).

Kaveney agrees with Burgchardt and Ott's analysis, stating that the story displays 'capitalism as normative; with unconscious assumptions about racism, sexism and imperialism' (2010: n.p.); while Žižek describes the film as a 'typical ideological diversion that sympathises with the idealised aborigines but rejects their actual struggle' (2010: n.p.). Veracini concludes that *Avatar* is 'settler colonial' (2011) despite claiming that director Cameron set out to present the film as something contrary; '[the film] aimed at addressing other social and political concerns...but ends up privileging the point of view of the protagonist' (ibid.: 364). Boaz however disagrees with Veracini et al and describes *Avatar* as 'a perfect soufflé of left-wing attitudes' (2010: n.p.) with anti-establishment and anti-capitalist themes.

While many have accepted that *Avatar* tends to show features of a racist, pro-Western film, an aspect of the debate that Veracini and others have failed to take into account is the way in which the story disseminates neoliberal identity constructs in response to a heightening loss of confidence in the model. This investigation aims to build upon the theses of Burgchardt and Ott, Adamson et al, and will add a new paradigm of examination to *Avatar* by exploring the extent to which colonial and capitalist norms are reconstructed within this neoliberal milieu.

This chapter brings fresh lines of argumentation into the debate regarding the role that protagonist Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) plays in promoting neoliberal identity, as well as the contemporary representation of the noble savage Other in the same context (2.3). The investigation begins by exploring the way in which *Avatar* portrays this identity, analysing two prominent antagonists in addition to Sully (2.2). Later, it will explore aspects of the film that might re-establish key monocultural, colonial and neoliberal patterns (2.4), before linking the chapter's findings to the research as outlined in chapter one.

## **2.2 A Critical Interrogation of Corporate Militarism in *Avatar***

The disassociation of the liberal protagonist from the 'flaws of modernity and White society' (Thomas 2005: 457)<sup>73</sup> has emerged as a running theme throughout many Hollywood features. Johnson's *Looper* (2012), Reeves' *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014) and Spielberg's *Ready Player One* (2018) each display examples of a general tendency for Hollywood to depict an urbanised (US) society as one that is environmentally ravaged, morally corrupt and/or in economic decline – a theme that potentially indicates dissatisfaction with key aspects of the neoliberal system.

*Avatar* seemingly demonstrates facets of this same trend in its rejection of the Research Development Agency's (RDA) corporate capitalist agenda, which explicitly places monetary profit over environmental and social responsibility. The extent to which neoliberalism has had a negative effect on twenty-second century Earth is embodied in protagonist Sully, who has been discharged from the military after suffering permanent paralysis as a result of his experiences at the forefront of twenty-second century war with Venezuela. At the outset of *Avatar*, he lives in a small apartment and spends his time drinking and picking fights in bars. These images of the disabled protagonist, living a fruitless existence on account of his military

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<sup>73</sup> See the discussion of primitivism in 1.4.

past, appear to point to evidence of an early criticism of US neoliberal values and foreign policy – a subject that many mainstream commentators were keen to emphasize in their reviews of the film.<sup>74</sup>

Hamaker's discussion of *Avatar*'s corporate and military message for instance links the RDA's agenda on the alien moon Pandora to the US occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, claiming that 'Cameron cribs terminology from the ongoing war on terrorism and puts it in the mouths of the film's villains ...as they fight terror with terror. Cameron's sympathies are clearly with the Na'vi – and against the military and corporate men' (2009: n.p.). Not by coincidence, Cameron has supported Hamaker in interview, stating a personal opposition to American incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan:

[*Avatar* is] very much a political film...this movie reflects that we are living through war.

There are boots on the ground; troops who I personally believe were sent there under false pretenses, so I hope this will be part of opening our eyes (Lang 2010: n.p.).

Turning to an assertion by Jones (2010: 39) that public outrage with regard to the invasion of Iraq in particular has cultivated a tendency to depict the primary antagonists in many popular Hollywood films as the US government and/or military,<sup>75</sup> *Avatar* certainly mirrors this as a disillusioned Sully arrives to Pandora with nothing to lose; in need of emancipation and physically scarred by the corrupt, immoral world he left back on Earth. Upon arrival however, he finds more conflict between the native Na'vi population on one side, and the RDA and their trigger-happy mercenary army on the other.

RDA security army Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang) and chief administrator of the mining project Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi) deserve closer inspection because of the way

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<sup>74</sup> See 2.1.

<sup>75</sup> See Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2003), also the *Bourne* spy series (Liman/Greengrass/Gilroy 2002, 2004, 2007, 2012, 2016) and Scott's *Body of Lies* (2008) for examples of this.

both seem to represent two sides of the same contemporary neoliberal coin in a negative light. Primary antagonist Quaritch displays typical features of the paradigmatic colonial-era movie villain, following other Hollywood characters like Colonel Tavington (Jason Isaacs) in Emmerich's *The Patriot* (2000) and Governor Ratcliffe (David Ogden Stiers) in Gabriel and Goldberg's *Pocahontas* (1995). His extreme racist and imperial ideals are regularly disseminated to the audience, for example upon Sully's arrival and debrief on Pandora when he categorically states: '...out beyond that fence every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes' – and then again at the film's climax where his absolute determination to exterminate the Na'vi is demonstrated through the line: 'nothin's over while I'm breathin'!'

Quaritch's characterisation – a white male around the age of fifty, invariably dressed in full military attire, with overtly an machismo persona (at one point describing the scientists working on the Avatar program as 'limpdicks'), is also consistent with stereotypical representations of prejudiced, hyper-masculine military characters in older Hollywood war films like Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey) in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) or Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) in Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

Selfridge provides a different example to Quaritch: unlike the colonel he displays fleeting signs of humanity but appears to be persistently under pressure from the faceless authoritative RDA shareholders back on Earth to continue aggressively mining the planet for 'Unobtainium' at any cost.<sup>76</sup> This is emphasized to the audience through the line: 'killing the indigenous looks

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<sup>76</sup> A parallel here can be drawn with Jones' *Moon* (2009) wherein lead character Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell) is under consistent pressure to mine the moon for a resource named Helium-3 from hard-nosed Lunar Industries board members Overmeyers (Matt Berry) and Thompson (Benedict Wong). Furthermore, with regard to the 'Unobtainium' resource itself, the linguistic connotations of the word (i.e. not obtainable) indicate a reference to ideals of Weber's capitalist spirit (1930) in that the RDA – the primary symbol of American neoliberalism in the film, are willing to undertake the difficult task of extracting this rare resource. Most importantly from the analytical perspective of this chapter, they are successful in this.

bad, but there's one thing shareholders hate more than bad press and that's a bad quarterly statement'.

In this case, both characters manifest palpable symbols of criticism of US neocolonial expansion in the manner expressed by Jones above: with Quaritch assuming the face of post-WWII US imperial violence, and Selfridge a representative of contemporary neoliberal capitalism charged with ensuring that the system continues its onward march in finding new avenues of wealth creation at any cost. Considering this perspective, the chief administrator in particular attracts interest from an analytical point-of-view for a number of reasons: his keen interest in golf for example further symbolically associates him with corporatism – as does his rejection of environmentalism and liberalism, which is illustrated in the line 'what the hell have you people been smoking out there? They're just goddamn trees!' Taking into account Cameron's comments on the Iraq invasion, at this point it can be claimed that the two characters point to evidence of an explicit criticism of US imperial militarism and neocolonial economic expansionism in *Avatar*, supporting the point-of-views of Ebert, Gardner and Cohen in the mainstream press and more importantly of course, that of Cameron himself.

Selfridge's ignorant outburst in the scene as discussed above is in contrast to a previous instance where he is shown slumped in his office chair looking reflectively at a lump of Unobtainium, debating whether to go ahead with an attack on the Omaticaya's village named 'Hometree' (see figure 2.2.1)



**Figure 2.2.1:** Selfridge sitting reflectively in his office chair.

Here the medium shot shows Selfridge sitting down facing the audience so as to associate them with the morality of his difficult decision. In the room with him is Quaritch, who is calmly trying to convince him to sanction the attack – reinforcing his figurative role as a representative of the United States' war-mongering conservative right. He is, in contrast to Selfridge, standing, dressed in military attire and filmed slightly to the side. The choice of side-angle shot chosen by Cameron can be argued to dissociate the viewer from Quaritch's immoral militarist agenda, lending weight to his own claim that *Avatar* is an anti-neoliberal film. The contemplative manner of Selfridge's body language on the other hand indicates to the viewer that there is 1) some humanity left in him, and more relevantly 2) that what he is doing is 'morally wrong', but the form of corporate governance that now rules this future society has become too dominant, leaving him with no choice but to give the green light on the Hometree attack.

Wider self-reflection on the part of the liberal elite with regard to their apathetic opposition to the Iraq War appears to be encapsulated in Selfridge as the scene alludes to a criticism from the scriptwriters of a contemporary world system that is losing its humanity and



prioritises capital gain over humanitarian issues. The RDA's board of directors back on Earth (who are not depicted in the movie) seem to be more concerned with their profits than with the death of thousands of Na'vi, and are evidently able to sanction such a massacre without society on Earth either 1) caring (because they too have lost their humanity and possibly consider the utilisation of the resource for their daily lives on Earth more important), or 2) are unable to protest the attack because their apathetic indifference during the proliferation of these conglomerate corporations has left them politically powerless and unable to prevent such atrocities in this fictional future.

In contrast to Quaritch and Selfridge, protagonist Sully retains a certain innocence and integrity throughout the narrative. Unlike the human antagonists in *Avatar*, he is depicted as wanting more from life than material and monetary wealth; as love interest Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) communicates at one stage: Sully also has a 'strong heart', and holds 'no fear'. Throughout the narrative, he is portrayed as being disillusioned with Earth's fixation on materialism and, more tellingly, government policy on social security, complaining in one instance: 'they can fix a spinal, if you've got the money. But not on vet benefits, not in this economy'. Money is not a motivator for him; rather he strives to discover an intrinsic source of inspiration that will give some meaning to his life. In this way his time on Pandora provides that, enabling him to find the cause 'worth dying for' that he so desires – an ambition he makes quite clear in the film's opening monologue.

Veracini draws attention to the manner in which *Avatar* goes to 'extraordinary lengths to facilitate the viewer's identification' with Sully (2011: 358). However considering the character's military background and initial 'deadbeat' persona, this remains a contentious issue. Instead, it appears that the narrative attempts to construct Sully as someone with whom the viewer might desire/aspire to be on the basis of his actions while on Pandora.

On the alien moon, he consistently demonstrates positive character traits of determination, passion and courage. Furthermore, as he becomes more and more familiar with the culture of the Na'vi, Sully develops a strong appreciation of the natural environment around him on Pandora, something he did not do on Earth. He demonstrates this newfound respect for the biodiversity of the rainforest in one scene by uttering ritual words of prayer before he kills one of the jungle's many creatures. This admiration for the environment is certainly lost on Selfridge and the other RDA employees who prefer to focus on economic gain and living in fear of the moon's dangerous flora and fauna.

Such an emphasis on Sully as a 'hybrid' figure – at once a military man, but also crippled – would certainly contrast with past war narratives and indeed some contemporary pro-neoliberal features. Wayne et al's *The Green Berets* (1968) demonstrates a good example of a film that reconstructs traditional ideals of the US military as a positive feature of plot narratives, while others like Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Cosmatos' *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) display a certain confidence in American military identity. It is worth stressing that Leo Davidson (Mark Wahlberg) in Burton's *Planet of the Apes* (2001), John Rambo in Stallone's *Rambo* (2008) and Matt Eversmann (Josh Hartnett) in Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001) highlight prominent examples of US specific military characters in twenty-first century film who also perpetuate the same value-system.

The emergence of film tendencies to depict a fragile 'human' side to Hollywood protagonists perhaps illustrates a deterioration in this self-assurance. Indeed, this formula has now all-but replaced earlier one-dimensional representations – something that was discussed in 1.4. Many have also argued (Scott 2000, Žižek 2012, Rings 2016) that in some cases, the development of these predilections highlights a growing insecurity with the idea that neoliberal/capitalist identity constructs are superior. In this context, considering Sully as a disabled, troubled protagonist in *Avatar* – and not a traditional able-bodied, self-assured hero

in the shape of say *Planet of the Apes*' Davidson, a discontinuity can be discerned with previous Hollywood leads and *Avatar*'s protagonist in the same manner as Rings et al suggest.

Helicopter pilot Trudy Chacon (Michelle Rodriguez) presents an interesting case with regards to *Avatar*'s criticism of US foreign policy and military brutality *vis-à-vis* a potential loss in neoliberal superiority reflected on screen. Even though she never meets face-to-face with any Na'vi, Chacon finds herself appalled at the inhumanities of the RDA's treatment towards the natives and, after withdrawing from the attack of Hometree mid-battle, she subsequently 'defects' from the mining corporation's mercenary army and fights in the Na'vi's defence during the RDA's second attack. Avatar program scientists Dr. Max Patel (Dileep Rao) and Norm Spellman (Joel David Moore) also join on the side of the natives for the same battle.

This defection can be suggested to highlight a distinct rejection of US neo-imperialism and the inhuman direction that the mining company take on Pandora, breaking with neoliberal messages of older science fiction. The defection constructs a humanist-liberal perspective to *Avatar* that, in a sense, obligates the viewer to either denounce, or be complicit with, violent US-led neocolonial expansion. The implied moral validation of Trudy, Max and Norm's defection is confirmed in a prominent scene at the climax of the film which shows them beside Sully and other Na'vi leading the RDA workers to a ship that will take them back to Earth.

The audience is encouraged to be satisfied with this outcome; with the undoubted assumption being that because Sully and his friends represent a contrasting value-system to the RDA, they 'deserve' to remain in this non-capitalist, exotic paradise – unlike Selfridge et al. In this way *Avatar* heavily implies that the narrative's 'evil acts' are perpetrated by the institutional power structures that command, support and legitimise neocolonial actions, rather than the protagonist himself. We see this even though later it is actually Sully who leads the supposedly 'peaceful' race of extraterrestrials into an all-out war with the RDA. Furthermore,

despite his implied destiny as 'saviour' to the Na'vi, it is also Sully who betrays the tribe in supplying information to Quaritch regarding the internal structure of Hometree.<sup>77</sup>

Regardless of this betrayal, at the climax of the film it is the antagonistic neocolonial corporatists who are ultimately forced to return to the polluted mess of their own making back on Earth. With Sully remaining, able to realise who he 'really is' after finally finding the 'one single thing worth fighting for' that he could not find on Earth, the ending to the film presents the possibility that *Avatar* rejects US militarism and established neoliberal norms. Despite this, there are a number of problematic issues raised in the discussion above that demand a deeper investigation into other aspects of the narrative before a conclusion on *Avatar*'s socio-political position can be drawn.

### ***2.3 Restoring a Loss of Faith in Neoliberal Identity?***

Despite an explicit embrace of 'uber-neoliberalism' by the government and wider population of twenty-second century Earth, protagonist Sully wishes for something different in his life. To elaborate on why this idea of disassociation from neoliberalism appears so central to *Avatar*, it is necessary to comprehend the narrative concept of self-discovery in popular fiction. On this subject, one may argue that the dissemination of this theme as core to Hollywood storytelling can be conceivably linked to important US values of individualism, competitive achievement and material aspiration as reflected on screen. However, in consideration of the discussion in chapter one, it might also be legitimate to discuss the concept of self-discovery in contemporary science fiction as a reactionary expression to anxiety with regard to declining confidence in neoliberal superiority constructs.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See Teays discussion of Jake's personal crisis in 'betraying his race' (2012: 46).

<sup>78</sup> See Weber (1922) and Marx (1867).

In film contexts, this anxiety in turn could be suggested to manifest itself as some nondescript 'lack' or 'longing' within the protagonist's psyche, and if one accepts this idea, then it becomes clear to see why the need to propagate the discourse of personal self-discovery might take on a more central importance in Hollywood film narratives. Although anxieties regarding the legitimacy of early neoliberal discourses were evident in the story, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) has been discussed by many as a 'masterpiece' of colonial writing that promotes the idea of eighteenth century English capitalist identity as superior (see Said 1991, Joyce 1964).<sup>79</sup>

One particular dynamic of the relationship between the protagonist and Friday in the book is that Crusoe commits quite readily to the role of a patriarchal teacher, showing a natural desire to transmit archetypal English values on to the willing Friday. However, in what provides an example of a break with this tendency, *Avatar* disseminates an alternative to this traditional binary somewhat in that here, Sully's encounter with the Na'vi Other seems to involve what could be described more agreeably as a learning/spiritual awakening process, where the indifferent, disaffected hero, denigrated as a result of neoliberal expansion, is brought back to self-actualisation in his experience with the alien Other.

The Na'vi can certainly be said to appear as the embodiment of a romanticised desire for a return to an idealised, pre-industrial, non-capitalist life. Their portrayal as a society draws a contrast with popular self-depictions of an often violent and corrupted US in media and film, not to mention the over-polluted metropolis that Cameron introduces us to at the outset of *Avatar* (this scene is available only to viewers of the film's director's cut).

Indeed the Na'vi live in cohesive harmony with their natural surroundings, they are not dependent upon an all-pervasive global economic system, and they do not exploit each other

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<sup>79</sup> Rings' analysis highlights the role of Crusoe as a 'successful capitalist of his times' (2011: 131) in that he is a wealthy landowner and businessman who embodies the individualism of 18<sup>th</sup> century English capitalism.

for their own malevolent gain. In this context, it appears that the Na'vi function to help Sully in 'reminding' him of his lost humanism.

To explore further how such an idea may be linked to a criticism of neoliberalism, it is important to further summarise the protagonist's situation in the context of his transformation from disillusioned soldier to saviour of the natives. As a former marine, Sully embodies the medium through which the hegemonic agenda of militarised corporatism is established. As *Avatar* begins, the audience is introduced to a troubled individual, struggling to find a place for himself in a materialist dystopian 2154 AD; indeed Jones comments that from the outset, the audience is able to observe that the character is at odds with the 'hyper-competitive, uber-macho, techno-magical world of military braggarts' (2010: 39) from which he is supposed to belong.

The protagonist's alienation can be discerned in the film's opening scenes set on Earth (again viewable only in the extended version of *Avatar*). Overlaid with narration by the character on his disability, it comprises a stern-faced Sully looking directly into the camera lens, waiting to cross the road in an unnamed, overcrowded futuristic American city. The *mise-en-scène* places the wheelchair-bound protagonist directly in the centre of the frame, we can observe immediately that he is only person in the shot sitting down, something that works to emphasize the extent to which he is estranged from the society around him. Additionally, he is also the lone individual at the crossing without an oxygen mask (surely worn because of the high levels of pollution on Earth in 2154). The fact that he cannot even be bothered to wear a mask accentuates his lost enthusiasm for life in that he no longer appears to care that he is slowly poisoning his body.

Subsequently however, Sully's enthusiasm for life is restored in his experience with the Na'vi and in his relationship with Neytiri – who teaches him how to fly the Banshees, ride the 'Direhorses', and navigate his way through the dense alien rainforest around Hometree. His

spiritually liberating encounter with the Na'vi Other could be claimed to designate him as a literal avatar for disillusioned viewers.

Sully's desire to find a worthy cause to live for in a world where the populace is seemingly primarily motivated by economic gain would arguably support those with a Marxist approach (Tang 2011) to analysing the film in that it portrays a tacit acknowledgement that the very *raison d'être* of capitalism, with its relentless devotion to profit maximisation and promotion of shallow materialism, does very little for the human condition. The overall encounter with the alien Other as a reinvigorating experience to a dissatisfied Self certainly demonstrates a break in comparison with older 'going native' features like Silverstein's *A Man Called Horse* (1970) for instance. The fact that Sully transforms from an incapacitated, disillusioned 'tool' of expansionist capitalism to an accomplished, ambulatory, king-of-the-native 'jungle warrior' during his time with the Na'vi Other points to a narrative that promotes the presence of an apparent self-potential that can be summoned through these kinds of experiences – with the Other acting as a catalyst for this.

This could perhaps be interpreted to be a development on the neo-romantic noble savage discourse of Rousseau (Cranston 1991) and in this way could be contextualised using the case of another of Cameron's films: the critically acclaimed *Titanic* (1997). Žižek describes lead character Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) as a 'vanishing mediator, whose function it is to restore a sense of identity and purpose' (2011: 162) to the rich young Rose Dawson (Kate Winslet), whose privileged life within the British establishment is apparently unfulfilling and joyless.<sup>80</sup> Žižek's theory would appear to correlate to the self-discovery motif, and in this

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<sup>80</sup> Žižek describes how Rose longs for some excitement and adventure in her life and this is something that Jack provides during their short-lived romance aboard the ship. In fact, such is Rose's love for Jack that she promises to go with him once the Titanic docks in New York. Analysing the film from a psychoanalytic perspective, Žižek points out that this would have been disaster for couple as '...every reality, sooner or later, disappoints us' (2011: 162.). Jack's role exists only to reinvigorate the subject's vitality. This is subsequently confirmed when at the end of the film, after the Titanic itself has sunk and the two cling to piece of driftwood freezing to death, Rose exclaims to a fading Jack: 'I'll never let you go!' (ibid.) At which time she does just that, his *raison d'être* as the object of Rose's revitalisation is complete and he is no longer required.

context it is useful to apply the notion of Jack as a 'vanishing mediator' to *Avatar* and other science fiction examples to explore how the idea may have evolved to reconfirm neoliberal identity constructs in this era of low confidence.

In Ridley Scott's classic *Blade Runner* (1982) the replicant Other can be argued to exist specifically to fill a void in protagonist Rick Deckard's (Harrison Ford) life in a similar manner to that of the Na'vi and Sully. Possible evidence for this can be found in Roy Batty's (Rutger Hauer) famous speech at the end of the film, which is delivered as he comes to terms with his own mortality as a replicant with an artificially-engineered four-year lifespan:

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All these moments will be lost in time, like tears in the rain.

After Batty decides to spare Ford's character and passes away, the protagonist goes on to narrate: 'I don't know why he saved my life, maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody's life, my life'. Here, it can be claimed that Deckard is provided the opportunity to understand how fortunate he is to be afforded a privileged existence, whereas Batty is certainly not granted the same freedom in his permanently ascribed inferior position as the Other.

Moving along this line of argumentation, we can return once again to Bay's *The Island* (2005), which also follows this same idea, albeit in an adjusted manner. In this case, the Other is physically exploited by their sponsors who take the vital organs or limbs of the clones. Protagonist Lincoln Six Echo's (Ewan McGregor) sponsor Tom Lincoln's (also played by McGregor) playboy lifestyle has caught up with him and he has contracted hepatitis; hence he has invested in a clone so that he may soon harvest his liver for a transplant. Jordan Two Delta



(Scarlett Johansson) on the other hand is sponsored by a fictional supermodel that needs a number of organ transplants because she has been severely injured in a car crash.

In both of these films, the Other acts as a medium of restoration for those who are experiencing some form of physical or spiritual lack in their material lives. It can be argued that a similar paradigm is present in *Avatar*, with Sully appearing to selfishly exploit the Na'vi in order to regain his lost 'vitality'. At this point, it seems that through the dissemination of this paradigm, there exists reasonable grounds to propose that we can observe an attempt to counteract a particular loss of confidence in neoliberal identity constructs in *Avatar*, however an investigation into the extent to which neoliberal norms are (re)confirmed must be conducted first before any definite conclusions can be drawn.

#### **2.4 Neoliberal Continuities in *Avatar***

In works of Hollywood cinema and other Western literature, lead protagonists tend to play a particular role in preserving deep-rooted ideas of superiority inherent to what might be termed the fictional white hero – this is an important facet to neoliberalism as has been argued in chapter one of this thesis. In his famous book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said illustrates the narrative function of such characters:

The novelistic hero...exhibits the restless energy of the enterprising bourgeoisie; they are permitted adventures in which their experiences reveal to them the limits of what they can aspire to, where they can go and what they can become. The novel ends...with the protagonists' accession to stability...in the form of confirmed identity (1994: 71).

The recurring dichotomy *vis-à-vis* the privileged position that the Self assumes over the inferior Other in European and North American literature is claimed to derive from long-standing elements of colonial discourse that many scholars argue is still discernible in many

Hollywood films today.<sup>81</sup> Stereotypical attributes of the 'enterprising bourgeoisie': masculine leadership, calculating intelligence and strong individualism for example, are readily detectable in the makeup of lead protagonist characters in past works of literature going back as far back as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895). However, as was discussed in 1.5, similar traits remain today in some form or another and can be observed in contemporary Hollywood sci-fi film lead characters like Del Spooner (Will Smith) in *Proyas' I, Robot* (2004), Neo/Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) in the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999) and James T. Kirk (Chris Pine) in Abrams and Lin's *Star Trek* series (2009, 2013, 2016).

In a postcolonial framework, *Avatar*'s Sully can be suggested to follow the prototype of Said's enterprising bourgeoisie paradigm almost to the letter (see Veracini 2011: 356 and Hyland 2010: 13f.): within three months of being introduced to the alien tribe, he quickly learns how to hunt, fight and navigate Pandora's vast rainforests as well as – and then better than – his inferior Omaticaya peers. The speed in which Sully develops his skills can certainly be linked to neoliberal cognitive codes of intellectual superiority and problem-solving ability despite the protagonist's clear rejection of academic education and the scientific method. Sully's antipathy towards education is evident throughout *Avatar*; in an early monologue he describes his identical twin brother Tommy as a scientist, while referring to himself as a 'dumb grunt'; later after meeting the Omaticaya tribe's elders and convincing them to allow him to 'learn their ways', he typifies his methods as 'not something you can teach'.

In this context of neoliberal superiority, references to Sully's character are communicated to the viewer early in the movie: revealing that he chose to become a marine for the 'hardship' because he believed he could 'pass any test a man could pass'. His ability as an exceptional marine is later communicated in a comment by Quaritch who says: 'I pulled your record, Corporal. Venezuela – that was some mean bush.' The line implies that Sully's abilities as a

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<sup>81</sup> See Burnstein and Studlar (1997) and Nadel (1997) for in-depth discussions on the subject.

soldier excelled under the extremely hostile conditions of a fictional imperialistic war with a contemporary 'ideological enemy' of the United States. Regardless, in this conversation with Quaritch, Sully's destiny is being cast through brief allusions to his ambition, bravery and abilities as a soldier.

One of his particular standout talents is that of his capacity to fly pterodactyl-like winged creatures named Banshees with great skill. After taming his own, Sully exclaims to the viewer: 'I might not be much of a horse guy, but I was born to do this.' His unusually remarkable ability in flying the Banshee is where the protagonist's future heroism lays; later in the film, after the human attack on Hometree and Sully's expulsion from the Omaticaya for deceit, he attempts to win back the trust of the natives by taming another, larger wild flying animal called a 'Toruk'. Neytiri articulates the significance of this creature in an earlier part of the movie, laying the foundation for Sully's future (seemingly ascribed) heroism:

My grandfather's grandfather was Toruk Macto – Rider of Last Shadow. Toruk chose him. It has only happened five times since the time of the First Songs. Toruk Macto was mighty - he brought the clans together in a time of great sorrow. All Na'vi people know this story.

The enormity and potential consequences of Sully's fate is brought to attention in this comment, and his subsequent successful taming of the Toruk becomes the catalyst for the Omaticaya revival. The moment illustrates a continuity in relation to colonial discourse in that Sully appears to fulfil the role of the assumed civilised and superior Self in contrast to an inferior, god-fearing Other.

Ostensibly, the act of bravery in taming the Toruk is seen to 'prove' Sully's allegiance to the tribe in that he is ready to risk his life for the sake of the 'primitive' Na'vi, however the scene itself has clear neocolonial associations for Edwards who believes that it demonstrates the white man 'buying off a primitive culture with a worthless act, setting up the [capitalist] as

divine' (2010: 37). Elsaesser also sees Sully's representation here as 'white messiah stereotyping' (2011: n.p.), something this study would agree with.

The wide, low angle shot employed by Cameron as Sully descends towards the cowering Na'vi bolt-upright astride the Toruk, accentuates a propensity to portray the protagonist with a god-like divinity, with the rays of sunlight emerging from behind Sully emphasizing this (see figure 2.4.1). At the same time, the wide high angle shot employed as Sully descends – in conjunction with the deep, dramatic drum beat instrumental – draws attention to the vulnerability and inferiority of the Na'vi in the scene. In a wider film context, as Sully's divinity grows, the Na'vi's desperate situation can also be seen to exacerbate; illustrated by the fact that in the scene in question the tribe have turned to communal prayer in their search for some kind of divine intervention from their deity Ewha.



**Figure 2.4.1:** Sully's demi-god status confirmed among the Na'vi.

The attempt by Cameron to turn Sully into a God-like savior to the Na'vi can be further supported by bringing attention to the fact that the Na'vi are in the middle of this religious ceremony as the protagonist arrives on the Toruk – indicating to the viewer that the tribe's prayers have literally been answered. It is also worth pointing out that the religious connotation to the scene also highlights the extent to which culturally, Christianity remains very much part of US identity constructs in *Avatar*.

Being one of only five individuals who have managed to tame a Toruk in the communicative history of the alien race, the act predictably endears Sully to the 'awed natives' – who in turn make him a champion amongst them (see Hyland 2010: 15). The images of the protagonist as the new leader/saviour of the alien Other subsequently works to fulfil another important requirement of the colonial narrative *vis-à-vis* the masculine desire of colonialist in subjugating the Other.

Despite the implication that Sully rejects neoliberal values as his allegiance to the Na'vi grows (Quaritch at one point berates him: 'how does it feel to betray your own race?!'), the Toruk-taming act reminds us that the protagonist is inexorably indebted to neoliberal identity constructs for his superiority over the Other nonetheless. Furthermore, thanks to this apparent 'natural' superiority, in their acceptance of Sully as the god-like 'Toruk Macto', the Na'vi inadvertently fall under the control of the same neoliberal hegemonic domination of which they were initially supposed to be resisting.

Investigating the colonial underpin to *Avatar* further, it is useful to draw upon the claim of Spivak in her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* regarding the recurring colonial dichotomy of 'white men having to save brown women from the terror of brown men' (1999: 206) in European literature. The romantic relationship between Sully and native (in this case) 'blue woman' Neytiri, can be said to reconstitute such a narrative in that she is saved by the

protagonist from the stagnant traditions of her tribe. Of Sully's situation with Neytiri, Hyland writes:

Jake hasn't just conquered any Na'vi woman, he has conquered the Na'vi par exemplar in that she is beautiful, desired by the succeder to chief, great-great-granddaughter of a legendary chief, and daughter of the current Omaticaya chief and of the high priestess. He doesn't take mastery over any old Na'vi, but the perfect most highly prized of all Na'vi (2010: 16).

In claiming Neytiri, Sully fulfils a classic colonialist function as a 'masculine redeemer of the wilderness' (Kaplan 1997: 56), a role in which he is confirmed and supported by the 'innocent' Neytiri. The word 'innocent' is quite necessary also because despite hollow attempts by Cameron to portray her as an independent woman with mainstream feminist values – subsequently discredited in interview by the director in which Neytiri is described as 'smart, bilingual, spiritual, great with animals and, for a 10-foot-tall cyan-colored woman with a tail, a babe' (Keegan 2009: n.p.) – the subordinate position Neytiri assumes to Sully within their relationship dynamic can be argued to enhance the already existing 'cultural hierarchy' in *Avatar* with a gender hierarchy that contributes to traditional colonial female gendering of the Other in constant need of patriarchal protection.

In comparison with other prominent female characters who do genuinely challenge traditional gender depictions of women in Hollywood cinema in Cameron's previous films like Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 2* (1991) and Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Aliens* (1986), Neytiri certainly does not have the same comparable depth of character. The few moments in *Avatar* where her actions and values could be described as progressive are compensatory at most.

To support this assertion, it is necessary to bring attention to the 'colonialist fantasy', described by Hunter as the 'repression and regulation of the native woman enacted within the romance narrative' (2001: 4). Hunter discusses the colonial tendency for the male colonialist's desire to 'civilise' the native woman (ibid.: 30) with the intention of appeasing ambivalent anxieties with regards to neoliberal masculinity. An example of this can be observed in the scene in which Dr. Grace (Sigourney Weaver) dies in the 'Tree of Souls' and an upset Sully delivers an 'inspirational' speech to the Omaticaya urging them to fight back against the RDA.

Firstly, the moment is significant in that Sully speaks instead of rival alpha-male Other Tsu'tey (Laz Alonso) who by this point in the film Tsu'tey has accepted the protagonist's superiority over him in light of the Toruk taming incident and assumes the subordinate role of translator. At the climax of his speech, an almost violently animated Sully can be seen to aggressively seize Neytiri by the hand and rush through the centre of the parting, cheering Omaticaya crowd. Next, both mount the giant, screeching Toruk, and with Sully at the helm, the two fly ahead of the other tribesmen – who follow on riding the smaller and more feminine-looking blue-coloured Banshees (see figure 2.4.2). The scene confirms Neytiri's rejection of



**Figure 2.4.2:** The Omaticaya tribe acknowledge Sully's superiority.

the stagnancy of the Na'vi as her relationship with Sully is publically accepted by her tribe – but moreover by Tsu'tey, the Omaticaya's alpha male with whom Neytiri was initially supposed to mate with so that he could become the tribe's next king.

Previous to *Avatar*'s release, Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), which tells the love story of British colonial settler John Smith (Mel Gibson) and native girl Pocahontas (Irene Bedard), was probably the most prominent explicit example of the 'civilising the native female' paradigm in Hollywood cinema (see Edgerton and Jackson 1996). Previous comparable dynamics are also observable in Costner's Oscar-winning *Dances With Wolves* (1990) in the relationship between Costner's character John Dunbar and Stands With A Fist (Mary McDonnell), as well as in Lynch's *Dune* (1984) in the love affair between Paul Atreides (Kyle McLachlan) and native Fremen girl Chani (played by Sean Young).<sup>82</sup> However today, considering the financial and financial success and worldwide impact factor of the film, *Avatar* perhaps now stands as the most conspicuous example of this dynamic in Hollywood cinema.

In Neytiri's relative beauty and athletic appearance, the character encapsulates long-held conventional paradigms detectable in wider Hollywood film concerning the Oriental female as an exotic object of desire. Young, slender and athletic, her braided hair and broken English signifies her implied Otherness coded the African native. Her exotification is completed by body paint and a necklace made of beads and feathers that only partially covers her breasts. In addition to this, *Avatar*'s underlying coloniser gaze can be further discerned in the fact that Neytiri wears a small leather thong: displaying a repetition of typical native imagery seen in the colonial-era artwork of Caspar Plautius and Giuliano Dati.

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<sup>82</sup> Despite acknowledging in interviews that films like *Dances With Wolves* and John Boorman's *The Emerald Forest* (1985) were used as a reference during his initial research on *Avatar*, such were the glaring similarities between the film and *Pocahontas* that Cameron was forced to file a 45-page sworn declaration detailing how major themes in the story were inspired from ideas that originated before *Pocahontas*' release in 1991 (See Acuna 2012).



In spite of this, the film's US production means that Neytiri displays readily familiar values of individualism in the way in which she rejects the mating 'traditions' of the Omaticaya tribe in order to confirm her relationship with Sully. Moreover, changing social attitudes towards gender equality means that she is prominent and aggressive in her approach to defending Hometree during the RDA's attack. This is observable in the way she leads the tribe from the front and in doing so, eventually kills the primary symbolic embodiment of white neoliberal masculinity – mercenary leader Colonel Quaritch. Despite these actions, Neytiri's position in the traditional gender hierarchy is ultimately confirmed in the dynamic of her romance with Sully: her attraction to him lays in his adaptability – a trait missing in her own 'stagnant' tribe, and her later recognition of Sully as the Omaticaya leader ultimately confirms her subordination to the film's protagonist.

The opening shot of an exotified Pandora rainforest, overlaid with accompanied audio of stereotypical tribal singing and drumming, draws instant comparisons to popular depictions of jungle-based backdrops in colonial-era classic literature like Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912) and Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899). Many years ago, famous novelist and critic George Orwell discussed a recurring feature pervasive to British literature:

[In these novels] adventures only happen at the ends of the earth, in tropical forests, in Arctic wastes, in African deserts...everywhere, in fact, except the places where things really do happen (in Davidson 2001: 251).

Orwell's assertion can be easily applied to film when Hollywood sci-fi features such as McTiernan's *Predator* (1987), Spielberg's *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997) and Antal's *Predators* (2010) are taken into consideration,<sup>83</sup> with each of these examples set in spaces archetypal to colonial literature.

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<sup>83</sup> See Marshall's *Congo* (1996) and the *Indiana Jones* series (Spielberg 1981, 1984, 1989, 2008) also.

In discussion of *Avatar* and Pandora, Gautam writes that 'imperial representations of the colony are always underwritten by the fantasy of the empty land' (2015: 90), a comment that could be ascribed to the Pandoran rainforest. Edward Said also discusses binary dichotomies of space in colonial-era literature (1994: 61)<sup>84</sup>, a concept that can also be linked to the comments of Orwell and Gautam. Said describes the idea of territory in literature as invariably consisting of a 'metropolitan space' and a 'colonial space', with metropolitan space occupied by the superior Self. This is denoted by what Said describes as 'socially desirable, empowered space' (1994: 61) and is inimical to colonial space – fundamentally the domain of the Other.

The manifestations of the two different kinds of space can be both physical and mental: physical in relation to the 'civilised' order of metropolitan space, which is always in binary opposition with the disorder and decay of colonial space, and mental in that it exists within the psychological constructs and attitudes of the people involved in the (neo)colonial process.

A spatial binary comparable to Said's dichotomy is present in *Avatar* in the shape of Pandora: one that comprises a binary depiction of the RDA research facility as representative of the 'familiar', versus the primitive 'empty' savagery of the Pandoran rainforest. On Pandora, metropolitan space belongs mentally to the RDA as superior bearers of scientific knowledge and modernity – emphasized primarily in their ability to travel light years through space for instance. Physical metropolitan space is depicted in the actual base itself, which houses the

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<sup>84</sup> On the subject of 'space', Said wrote that 'in British culture one may discover a consistency of concern in Spenser, Shakespeare, Defoe and Austen that fixes socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan England or Europe and connects it by design, motive, and development to distant or peripheral worlds, conceived of as desirable but still subordinate. And with these meticulously maintained references come attitudes - about rule, control, profit and enchantment' (1994: 52). Spatial fixing is an integral part of maintaining imperial power structures and can be said to be evident in many fields in addition to literature and film. Jones writes that 'in a globalised, networked and post-modern world, space trumps time as an organising principle and as a site of meaning' (2015: 9), in this way the notion of space in film is regularly employed to highlight the essential articulations of difference between the superior Self and the inferior Otherness. Disseminations of spatial difference and wider tacit control of 'culture' are particularly effective as they are largely exonerated from explicit criticisms of imperial control and often analysed 'apolitically' within mainstream media.

hyper-advanced technology. Contrastingly, outside the base the environment is inhabited by strange and unusual flora and fauna, a distancing technique that illustrates the exoticism of the non-familiar colonial space. The primitive representation of the Omaticaya's village Hometree with its hammocks (evocative of the first-contact-era artwork of Datí of instance) and campfires confirms the presence of so-called colonial space as constructed within the colonial imagination. In the dissemination of this spatial dichotomy, *Avatar* reconstructs an important facet of colonial discourse.

## 2.5 Concluding Remarks

Through a binary tendency to depict big business as corrupt, self-interested and devoid of morality, *Avatar* is a film that mainly criticises US foreign policy and the military interventionism of the George W. Bush-era. It is certainly a feature that has a narrative heavily influenced by the Iraq War fallout – something Burghardt and Ott (2011) also discuss in their analysis of the RDA attack on Hometree.<sup>85</sup> In addition to James Cameron's comments regarding his own opposition to the invasion, the assertions of Cohen (2009), Gardiner (2009) and Ebert (2009) in the mainstream press on *Avatar* as an anti-neoliberal and anti-American feature certainly seem validated to an extent.

However, this investigation asserts that while Colonel Quaritch demonstrates a good example of someone who might illustrate the film's anti-military stance, an evident lack of depth to the character indicates that he might function more precisely as an object to which the audience can articulate their frustration regarding the RDA's inhumane practices. Quaritch's blatant racism and his merciless killing of the Na'vi can furthermore be suggested to be symbolic in that it dissociates the viewer from the malicious actions of the RDA.

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<sup>85</sup> Burghardt and Ott comment: 'the Na-vi, it transpires, are sitting on a rich seam of the precious mineral unobtainium and are about to be brutally removed by an American military machine in one of many Iraq war nods (2011: n.p.).

His death at the hands of Neytiri appeases the suffering that the Omaticaya have experienced throughout the story. The character's function as a focus point for that suffering is emphasized in director Cameron's stylistic choice to include a blood-stained, oversized knife in the very forefront of the frame in-between the viewer and Quaritch at the moment of his death. In this way, once Quaritch is dead, Cameron implies that the Na'vi are liberated from the RDA's 'occupation' of the moon.

*Avatar* also chastises neoliberal expansionism for its harmful effect on the natural environment. The release of *Avatar* in 2009 at a time when many political leaders were hesitant to commit to climate change targets reflects an increasing societal unease over a reluctance to criminally prosecute large corporations over their poor sustainability records – as well as acknowledge the overwhelming scientific evidence that points to industrialisation as the leading cause of this phenomenon from the US right (see Goldenberg 2014: n.p.).

In this context, such allegories are evident with regard to the environmental destruction that the RDA brings to 'untouched' spaces of natural beauty on Pandora. This anxiety is particularly apparent in the scene when Sully communicates to the planet's deity Ewha in prayer: '...the world we come from, there's no green there. They killed their mother and they're gonna do the same here.' Not least essentialising the destructive nature of neoliberalism, Sully appears to be asking Ewha to appoint him with a divine privilege to lead the fight in expelling the RDA from Pandora, thereby preventing an ecological catastrophe.

Veracini discusses how Ewha accepts Sully's request and entrusts him to do just that. She also subsequently decides that she too will join the cause; 'transforming from a pantheistic goddess into an angry monotheistic God that takes sides; the Na'vi become an elect people carrying out God's will' (2011: 363). The scene in which the Na'vi (and later the animal species of the planet) drive out the RDA's mercenary army replicates a similar disavowal of neoliberal practices as is embodied in the portrayal of Quaritch. In this case the Na'vi can be seen to be

acting out a fantasy revenge attack on big businesses who fail to take into account the environmental ramifications of their actions. Once again, anti-military and pro-environmentalist themes can be put forward as prominent aspects of *Avatar*'s anti-neoliberal tendency.

Despite the above, the fact that Pandora ultimately falls into the hands of protagonist Sully poses an obstacle to the anti-neoliberal argument if one accepts the character's role as a member of the 'enterprising bourgeoisie' as was discussed in 2.4. At the end of the film, the fact that Sully becomes Toruk Macto, leader of the alien tribe, means that he fulfils a central facet of colonial discourse – this despite the intention of the scriptwriters to distance the character from long-held imperial mentalities. Veracini observes quite rightly that 'the Na'vi should recognise Jake [Sully] as a leader on the basis that he reproduces the most typical settler colonial [sic] wishful fantasy and demand: mastery as a claim to property' (2011: 362).

In this context we can observe that the alien world is still inadvertently in control of a representative of neoliberalism: albeit an adjusted form of identity that displays a measure of humanity as a ruse for its shallow acknowledgement of the Other's existence. Using Sully, the film reinforces character traits closest to the idea of this construct by incorporating traditional elements of colonial discourse into the character's representation. The scene in which Sully tames the Toruk – an act that this investigation claims confirms the superiority of neoliberal identity in *Avatar* – is the culmination of this. In this scene, Sully achieves the colonialist's objective of gaining supremacy over the Na'vi through his own calculated risk-taking in a sense that is agreeable to political norms in this epoch.

Once his superiority over the natives is confirmed, Sully then leads the Na'vi to victory over the RDA antagonists. Again, the act appears to confirm neoliberal cognitive codes, but also displays an acknowledgment that neoliberal-led corporate capitalism is a detrimental social, environmental and economic presence. Thus in ousting the RDA from Pandora, Sully

finally attains some degree of revenge for centuries of actual colonial suppression, imperial subjugation and present-day economic exploitation that the Other has suffered at the expense of neoliberal expansionism.

Furthermore, at the very end of *Avatar* when the RDA employees are personally escorted by Sully et al onto the ships that will take them back to Earth, a neoliberal milieu is explicitly established when we consider that the Na'vi appear to have accepted the least brutal of one of only two options available to them: be saved by the 'compassionate' humanism of Sully and his friends or be destroyed by a malevolent militarised 'corporate' capitalism. The scenario echoes the ultimatum delivered by Tony Blair in his speech on the future of the Middle East as discussed in chapter one (1.3), and perhaps furthermore illustrates the enduring strength of neoliberalism today in that the audience themselves are also unable to contemplate any other outcome.

Firstly, the exiling of the RDA from Pandora is ostensibly supposed to initiate a reversal of the environment degradation that the corporation's mining on the planet began, and in banishing the antagonist RDA characters, *Avatar* to some extent turns attention away from the reality of the individual's indirect complicity in this process. Secondly, the assertion that Sully and his friends could create a utopian non-capitalist world on Pandora now that the RDA have been banished is quite impossible considering the logical judgement that Sully justifies many elements of neoliberalism with his actions. This investigation's proposal here is that in creating a narrative that is 'anti-American' (Gardiner 2009), *Avatar* allows the audience to psychologically circumvent their own guilt with regard to their complicity in that system of imperial and hegemonic domination.

In some aspects, *Avatar* argues that we should embrace a dialogue with the Other and actually consider learning from them. However the Na'vi, whilst noble, are permanently confined to Otherness at a fundamental level. Their resistance to (and lack of) technological

advancement, over reliance on an intangible spiritual world, and general naivety (as shown in their indecisive response to the human attack on Hometree) requires that it is ultimately up to Sully to show society the way to self-affirmation and moral redemption; the Na'vi – bound by essentialised constructs of femininity, inferiority and savagery, evidently hold too many shortcomings.

Linking the Na'vi's inferiority to Sully's obvious superiority in the context of the protagonist's Pandoran 'adventure', the way in which the protagonist's experience there reinvigorates his lost enthusiasm for life to an extent acknowledges a loss of self-assurance in neoliberal identity constructs and moreover, puts forward that some kind of action must be taken to 'restore faith'.<sup>86</sup>

Sully's particular 'crisis' is depicted as being caused by the structural difficulties of living in a profit-obsessed, uber-capitalist twenty-second century United States. Not least impoverished and living in a small apartment, he is also permanently disabled after being shot in Venezuela. However, provided this new lease of life on Pandora, neoliberal norms are stabilised in that, through Sully's experience and his implied superiority, the viewer is heavily coerced into concluding that, although flawed, the existence that neoliberalism provides is still the superior model to follow.<sup>87</sup>

This might mean that the concept of (adjusted) Otherness exploitation (a progression on the neo-romantic idea of the noble savage in which the Self learns from the Other) places the Na'vi into an assumed position of a commodity that can be exploited for the purposes of the

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<sup>86</sup> From a Marxist perspective, this notion of 'vitality restoration' could also be suggested to appease the essential anxiety fundamental to everyday capitalist existence. Scenarios comparable to *Avatar* are clearly observable in other commercially successful sci-fi features such as the Wachowski's *The Matrix* franchise (1999, 2003a, 2003b) for example, in which 'every man' computer programmer Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) is transformed into the messianic saviour of mankind 'Neo'. Twohy's *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004) also demonstrates something similar, in this case anti-hero Richard B. Riddick (Vin Diesel) becomes ruler of the universe by defeating Necromonger leader 'Lord Marshal' (Colm Feore).

<sup>87</sup> This might support Badiou's claim that 'partisans of the established order cannot really call [liberal democratic capitalism] ideal or wonderful. So instead, they have decided to say that all the rest is horrible' (Cox et al 2002: n.p.).

disillusioned viewer. On reflection, the sense of redemption offered to Sully by his experience with the Na'vi is completely one-sided considering the devastation that his presence causes the Omaticaya tribe. This is overlooked however as the Na'vi, existing in their role as a construct that exists for the sake of the Self, means that they are no way psychologically connected in the mind of the viewer to the difficult reality of life for 'actual exploited populations' (see Žižek 2010).

Considering the aspects discussed in this section, this investigation presents an in-depth criticism of *Avatar* within a neoliberal framework that adds to the research of Veracini (2011), Kaveney (2010) and Burgchardt and Ott (2011) et al respectively. Where this chapter offers a new paradigm of analysis to existing work on the film is the proposal that protagonist Jake Sully's experience on Pandora might serve to reinforce the superiority of neoliberal identity in precarious era for the model. The analysis of the spatial dichotomy on Pandora – as well as the analyses of Sully's love interest Neytiri and the characters of Parker Selfridge and Colonel Quaritch in this neoliberal framework, also adds further evidence to current research on *Avatar's* neoliberal and colonial tendencies.

*Avatar* should be regarded as a film that attacks neoliberal exploitation/excess and high-level corporatism to an extent, however it also largely normalises traditional Eurocentric superiority as white man Sully becomes the leader and saviour of Na'vi Other. With this outcome the audience – satisfied that their condemnation of military and corporate brutality has been attended to – can now relax again as the film has fulfilled its function in assaulting a 'symptom' of neoliberalism: i.e. critiquing its 'bad apples' but not its systemic flaws. In this way neoliberalism is ultimately justified.

Despite this, it could be said that *Avatar* appears to prefer the idea of system reform, promoting a greater awareness with regard to the way in which neoliberal expansion effects people and the environment. Overall however, the inescapable finality to the story – one of the



Na'vi having to decide whether they wish to be saved by one construct of neoliberalism or destroyed by another – confirms an underlying discourse preferential to neoliberal constructs in this film.

Whether or not this was the intention of director Cameron remains unclear when one reflects upon his anti-war comments in interview (See Lang 2010), as well as his tendency to dedicate substantial parts of the film's substructure to demonising the US military and corporatism. However, the privilege assigned to white protagonist Sully, an individual who exhibits all the preferable traits of the contemporary neocoloniser, destabilises any legitimate criticism of the neoliberal model in *Avatar*.

### 3. Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*

#### 3.1 Preliminary Remarks

Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* has been chosen for critical interrogation on account of the attention the film dedicates to highlighting the risks of surrendering government control to an unaccountable private sector organisation – namely the subcontracting of the mass-eviction of millions of alien 'prawns' to a private military company named Multinational United (MNU). Through an analysis of this scenario and the film's lead characters, this chapter seeks to determine in how far *District 9* can be said to critique neoliberalism by 1) exploring the depiction of MNU, 2) examining the story's representation of neoliberal identity, and 3) analysing continuities and discontinuities of neoliberal patterns.

*District 9* was, like *Avatar*, a commercial success. The film took just over \$210,000,000 at the box office and garnered mainstream critical acclaim in the shape of Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Visual Effects and Best Editing.<sup>88</sup> Despite a number of similarities in both storylines (see Veracini 2011, Weaver-Hightower 2014), *District 9* differs from *Avatar* in that it is set in an alternative present rather than a dystopian future. Based in Johannesburg in 2010, it tells the story of Wikus van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley), an employee for MNU who is charged with leading the relocation of millions of stranded aliens.

The film was praised by mainstream critics for its originality, special effects and bravery for confronting the horrors of apartheid head-on. In the same context, many commentators saw *District 9* as an anti-neoliberal feature; Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly* described the film as 'cheekily political...with a sharp resonance', stressing that 'it wears its allegorical

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<sup>88</sup> See Nel (2012: 548).

flourishes lightly' (2015: n.p.) in its critical portrayal of MNU. Sharkey saw a 'scathing social satire hidden inside a terrific action thriller that is teeming with gross aliens and regrettable inter-species conflict' (2009: n.p.); Barrett writes that '[in *District 9*] the Western imperialists are the bad guys, [their] cruelties are motivated by xenophobia, and are contemptible despite the aliens' status as unwanted intruders' (2010: n.p.). *Empire* magazine labelled *District 9* a 'political sci-fi thriller' (2009: 30), describing MNU as a 'shadowy private corporation...whose motives are far from pure' (ibid.: 31). Considering these viewpoints, it appears that most mainstream commentators were satisfied that the film delivers an anti-corporate message at the very least.

This theme – as well as *District 9*'s considerable mainstream success – drew the attention of critical theorists keen to analyse the film's socio-political framework. Hence the story has been the subject of considerable scholarly analysis in response to its allegories of apartheid (Heller-Nicholas 2011, Vaughan 2009), race (Nel 2012, van Veuren 2012) and colonialism (Rieder 2011, Veracini 2011, Weaver-Hightower 2014, Valdez-Moses et al 2010). Clearly a reconsideration of the social challenges that South Africa faced under apartheid, many discussions focused upon the *District 9*'s capacity to allegorise racial discrimination, and most agree (Rieder 2011, Veracini 2011 in particular) that the narrative displays tendencies of Othering. In this context, *The Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw highlighted the discriminatory undertones of the film's representation of Nigerians, which is certainly at odds with *District 9*'s liberal perspective:

In this movie, evil whites are in charge, albeit as officers of the all-powerful corporation – and such corporations are often introduced in dystopian sci-fi in a way that sneakily permits the filmmaker to avoid getting tangled up in recognisable political realities...the only important black character in this movie is a Nigerian crime-lord with cannibal

tendencies: yet the whites, presiding over their alien experimentation labs, are as bad, or worse (2009: n.p.).

There was quite a backlash concerning perceived anti-Nigerian sentiment in *District 9* from many commentators, so much so that the film made headlines on *BBC News*, who reported that Nigeria's information minister at the time – the late Dora Akunyili, was so upset with the film that she demanded an unconditional apology from Sony TriStar over what was 'an unwarranted attack on Nigeria's image' (2009: n.p.).<sup>89</sup> Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole also wrote that 'even making allowances for the fact that *District 9* is a fable, with strong elements of satire and allegory, the one-dimensionality of the Nigerian characters is striking' (*Africa is a Country* 2009: n.p.).<sup>90</sup>

In consideration of discursive inclinations, Valdez-Moses et al claim that contrary to the story initially appearing to praise the 'courage, conscience and compassion of white opponents of apartheid' (2010: 158), it ultimately depicts a 'persistent undercurrent of nostalgia for the good old days of racial segregation' (ibid.: 159); Veracini agrees and asserts that the film is 'incapable of thinking beyond segregation' (2011: 366). Walder comments that those of us living in the postcolonial present fail to comprehend the true horrors of Empire and as such, we are seeing contemporary nostalgia present in many films (*District 9* included) for a colonial past (2014).

Despite a convincing argument on the film's Apartheid representation, Walder, Veracini and Valdez-Moses et al and other writers have largely overlooked the epochal milieu to *District 9* – i.e. how this nostalgia for a colonial past could be linked to the film's production in an era

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<sup>89</sup> Akunyili alleged that 'the name of [our] former president was clearly spelt out as the head of the criminal gang and [our] are ladies shown as prostitutes sleeping with extraterrestrial beings' (ibid.).

<sup>90</sup> Nigerian-born British actor Hakeem Kae-Kazim also said: 'if the African continent truly wants to be liberated, we cannot sit back and allow this depiction of a few rotten apples to be spread across the world, I have lived in South Africa. The country has so many beautiful things to offer, but its problems can't be ascribed only to a small group of people' (Van Wyk 2009: n.p.).

of anxiety *vis-à-vis* doubt in the superiority of the neoliberal model. This chapter hopes to offer a fresh insight into this area of research with an investigation into the extent to which anti-neoliberal tendencies are present in *District 9* and in how they might destabilise current discourses regarding the authority of the model.

A review of Blomkamp's somewhat rawer short film project *Alive in Joburg* (2005) – on which *District 9* is based – provides evidence of why an analysis in the framework of this thesis is justified (see de Semlyen 2010: 58).<sup>91</sup> Certain adaptations observable when comparing *Alive in Joburg* with *District 9* points towards the indication of directed changes in the script to ensure that the film is acceptable for Hollywood mass consumption: replacing the originally black head of the mercenary soldiers in *Alive* with a white actor (David James plays MNU mercenary army colonel Koobus Venter) in particular demonstrates this.

The next subchapter (3.2) will explore the extent to which this correlates with discursive demands. In their analyses, Van Veuren (2012) and Nel (2012) discuss spatial boundaries in *District 9* at length, and in consideration of this, as well as the discussion on space in the *Avatar* chapter, this investigation will look into how the film disseminates space in relation to neoliberal contexts in 3.3. In the final part of this investigation, 3.4 will examine *District 9*'s depiction of the alien prawns and the Nigerians in a postcolonial milieu, concluding the inquiry by linking the chapter's findings to the methodology as outlined in chapter one.

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<sup>91</sup> *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson saw *Alive in Joburg* and went on to champion its development for full Hollywood production after Jackson's *Halo* project (whom Blomkamp was attached to direct) was pulled by studios in 2006. Jackson was a producer for *District 9* along with long-time collaborator Carolynne Cunningham (see Pavlus 2009).

### 3.2 *Revenge Fantasy in District 9?*

In an interview with *Empire* magazine, director Blomkamp outlined his personal opinion on how he believed a *District 9*-type situation might be handled by authorities if it were to actually occur: 'if aliens did arrive here with all this crazy technology, the first thing humans would do would be to set up something like MNU to milk them for every last cent!' (2009: 31). To contextualise this quote, Valdez-Moses et al comment that in *District 9*, the South African state appears to have yielded control to a corporation (2010: 165); and as Heller-Nicholas elaborates:

Multinational United, the private military company, stands in place of the government in the film. We never see government officials or soldiers. The very name [of MNU] implies that South Africa is not the only place where commercially-minded corporations have effectively replaced regional government structures (2011: 139).

The perceived diminishing influence that elected governments play in directing world affairs compared with that of largely unaccountable private corporations (see Wilson 2002, Dasgupta 2018) is a major subplot in *District 9* (something seen in *Avatar* too), indicating a strong criticism of so-called US globalisation. The presence of this theme in the film works to stress the growing prominence of corporations to the neoliberal world order, with apprehensions regarding the increasing prevalence of this principally embodied in the character of MNU security head Koobus Venter – a character who is given *carte blanche* to institute any means necessary to keep the aliens in check.

Rieder provides an analysis of the character and the role that he plays in providing the viewer with the opportunity to engage in a 'racialised revenge fantasy directed against white-male representatives of organised racial injustice' (2011: 41). This claim deserves further examination in the context of this investigation into declining confidence in neoliberalism. In

his work, Rieder also asserts that the climax of *District 9* features a scene in which the embodiment of the racist corporate regime directed against the alien Other is 'spectacularly and violently killed' (ibid.): in this case, Koobus is torn to pieces by group of angry aliens. His claim that 'the scene's violence extends to the institutional power structures that command, support and legitimise neocolonial actions' (ibid.: 42) would for one appear to support the opinions of Barrett and Sharkey (see 3.1) on *District 9*'s anti-corporate/anti-globalisation political stance, and furthermore indicate substantial dissatisfaction with neoliberal authority.

To determine whether Rieder's statement has substance, it is necessary to scrutinise the character in-depth. The first time the viewer encounters Koobus, he is standing casually at the back of the room as Wikus briefs the relocation team about the District 9 evictions; drawing attention to the character with a frontal shot as the protagonist states somewhat nervously to the camera: 'I think it's a great thing that it's not the military guys in charge this time'. After which the scene cuts away to shots of Koobus leading his 'cowboys' through a live fire training session in a moment that appears intercalated to confirm his military background. In addition to this, the anxiety in Wikus' voice in the briefing room as he converses with Koobus – as well as the contrast between Wikus and the laid back body language of the antagonist – signifies the colonel's relative ease with the conditions facing him in the hostile District 9 township that he is about to enter.

Next, as the protagonist and his team make final preparations before heading out to District 9, a violent uncompromising side of Koobus' character is revealed at the moment he angrily squares up to Wikus for questioning him regarding the excess of ammunition he is taking on the mission. In this scene also, the typical office attire of Wikus and colleague Fundiswa Mhlanga (Mandla Gaduka) can be contrasted with the military clothing of Koobus – something that segregates the value-systems of the two sets of characters. Where Koobus is armed with a machine gun that he seems more than willing to use, Wikus carries a clipboard

and refers more than once to 'regulations' that he feels should be strictly adhered to by the MNU soldiers.

Regardless, rather than a layered characterisation of Koobus outlining the psychological underpin to his violent personality, the one-dimensional implausibility of the character increases as the film proceeds: we can observe that he intends to use violence at any opportunity and has an intense racist hatred of the aliens. This shallow depiction reaches somewhat of a culmination in the scene where Wikus has knocked alien Christopher (Jason Cope) unconscious and climbed into the alien command module underneath his shack. Here Koobus at the same time enters the alien's home demanding to know how to open the door to the locked ship that houses Wikus; he stands over the cowering Christopher, pointing a gun to his head demanding to know how he can enter it. Christopher does not respond and in turn, Koobus, who is preparing to pull the trigger, exclaims 'I can't believe I get paid to do this...I love watching you prawns die!' The protagonist's embedded racism (explicitly illustrated once more in the film's final scene in where he calls an all-but transformed Wikus a 'half-bred piece of shit') appears designed to provoke the audience in that it goes against contemporary discourse on race.

At this point, it is useful to bring attention once again to the assertions of Jones (2010), Kellner (2009), Doran (2012) and Bonn (2010) regarding the recent tendency to designate the primary antagonists in many sci-fi (and war films) as high-level representatives of governments and/or corporations; like *Avatar*'s Quaritch, Koobus' representation certainly goes some way to supporting this theory.

In this regard, it can be suggested that similar kinds of characters to Koobus have been noticeably emerging in numerous films over the last thirty years in conjunction with a so-called decline in the confidence of neoliberal authority. Within the sci-fi genre itself, General Thade (Tim Roth) in Burton's *Planet of the Apes* (2001) and Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) of *The*



*Matrix* (1999, 2003a, 2003b) trilogy are similarly representative in their societal standing to Koobus. In wider cinema, Colonel William Tavington (Jason Isaacs) in Emmerich's *The Patriot* (2000) could also be justifiably described as an 'exaggerated rendition' (Rieder 2011: 46) of an historical racist military/government figure. The scene in *The Patriot* where Tavington orders a church containing a group of villagers be barricaded shut and burnt down is one particular act of shocking cruelty that supports Rieder's argument.<sup>92</sup>

As well as a focus on Koobus as an inhumane psychopath, his employers – Multinational United – are just as bad, if not worse, in their exploitation of the aliens for experimental purposes. This is highlighted by Heller-Nicholas:

In addition to MNU's institutionalised discrimination against the aliens, the ethically unsound medical experiments that Wikus discovers in the bio-lab reinforce the image of global corporate identities that MNU typifies as nothing but greedy, cruel and corrupt (2011: 139).

Reflecting upon particular actions and statements in *District 9* would seem to support Heller-Nicholas' assertion as well as those of Bradshaw (2009), Barrett (2009) and *Empire* (2009). At one point in the film for instance, Wikus is described as 'the most valuable business artefact on Earth'; in another, MNU scientists and CEOs display pure uncontained delight when they

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<sup>92</sup> Another prominent example of such a character presents itself in Edward Zwick's 2003 epic *The Last Samurai*. The film tells the story of a 19<sup>th</sup> century American army officer Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) who travels to Japan in order to help 'civilise' the Imperial Japanese Army. After a battle with samurai rebels, he instead finds himself the captive of Lord Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe) and his villagers, who oppose the modernisation of Japan. After coming to respect the disciplined, 'uncorrupted' ways of the samurai natives, Algren eventually fights with them against the American-led Imperial Army. Leading them in Algren's absence is Colonel Bagley (Tony Goldwyn), who fought with the protagonist during the Indian Wars back in the USA. Considering the evidence, Bagley could readily be added to the same functionary list as Koobus in light of the shocking acts that he committed upon Native Americans during the War. These actions, which are recounted to the audience through the nightmarish flashbacks of Algren (who has since become an alcoholic because of what he witnessed) were committed without contrition by Bagley who states that he 'did what he had to do' on the battlefield and 'has no remorse' for it (see Trinder 2012).

realise that a mutating Wikus is able to operate the weaponry they have seized from the alien mothership.

However, the scene in which the protagonist is taken to a secret facility and experimented upon demonstrates Heller-Nicholas' point most conspicuously; as it becomes apparent that MNU may be able to exploit his rapidly transforming body for military use, Wikus' own father-in-law Piet Smit (Louis Minnaar) gives the go-ahead for the scientists to vivisect the protagonist. The ruthlessness of MNU and its hierarchy is communicated quite bluntly as Wikus lays strapped to a bed in the research facility during a conversation between Smit and a lab scientist:

Piet: He's going to turn into one of them, a prawn?

Scientist: What happens to him isn't important. What's important is that we harvest from him what we can right now. This body represents hundreds of millions, maybe billions of dollars' worth of biotechnology. There are people out there, governments, corporations who would kill for this chance.

Piet: Will he survive the procedure?

Scientist: No, of course not. We need everything. Tissue, bone marrow, blood. The procedure's gonna basically strip him down to nothing.

Other MNU official: What about next of kin?

Wikus: Please, help me. Don't let them do it.

Piet: I'll handle that.

The cold-blooded intentions of MNU's agenda is confirmed here as Smit and the organisation quite mercilessly place their focus on profits solely over humanitarian interest. Moreover, the mistreatment of the hapless aliens in the lab with Wikus can be suggested to be visually evocative of the abuse that Iraqi prisoners received at the hands of US soldiers at Abu

Ghraib prison in Baghdad in 2003 (see figure 3.2.1) – a link that other scholars analysing the film have failed to point out.

Firstly, it can be acknowledged that the situation is quite different: for example the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal was largely defined by smaller ranking officers and soldiers exploiting their positions of power, while in *District 9*, the abuse is conducted in the name of monetary interests and big business. However, it can be argued that the construction of the *mise-en-scène* in the bio-lab takes its cue from the powerful images widely circulated by the world's media at the time the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib was exposed. In particular, notice the similar submissive stance of the prisoner on the left and alien on the right; in addition



**Figure 3.2.1:** Comparison of bio-lab scene in *District 9* with Abu Gharib.

the long shot of both subjects emphasizes the haplessness of their respective predicaments, as well their powerlessness in the face of their oppressors.

The one-dimensional depiction of both MNU and Koobus as cruel antagonists could be interpreted as a criticism from the filmmakers of actual government reliance on private security

firms to protect capital investment interests in oil or gas resources. The Blomkamp quote taken from the *Empire* interview would support this (see 3.1). Indeed, the subject of accountability has been one of increased media scrutiny in recent years – particularly in light of the Blackwater massacre of Iraqi civilians in 2007.<sup>93</sup>

Overall, like *Avatar*, frustrations and anger concerning neoliberal exploitation and corporate greed appear to be channelled directly at a private organisation: with the exposure of the alien experimentation program and the corporation's harsh, often violent treatment of the inhabitants of District 9 scandalising MNU publically. Despite this evidence, at this stage it can only be speculated that this anti-corporate inclination is unintentional in consideration of another of Blomkamp's comments in interview regarding *District 9*'s political message:

I didn't want it to beat people over the head with any sort of preachy moral lessons or anything. I didn't want it to be my point-of-view on the subject. But what I did want was all of that crazy Apartheid segregative atmosphere that I grew up with but in a science fiction setting. There's a lot about this film that's very subconscious and just in the fabric of me, and Apartheid and the segregation in Johannesburg is how I grew up. I was also a fan of science fiction films, a huge fan, so they're just merged now (Douglas 2009: n.p.).

At this point in the investigation, one may be tempted to write off the killing of Koobus as nothing more than typical Hollywood convention when it comes to dealing with primary antagonists (see Clover 2009), and the disavowal of MNU as a commonplace element to any mainstream Hollywood film plot. To advance this investigation within a neoliberal milieu, it is now important to consider the spatial construct of Johannesburg – an aspect of *District 9* examined by a Veracini (2011), Nel (2012), and Heller-Nicholas (2011) – in order to ascertain

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<sup>93</sup> See Karadsheh and Duke (2007).

whether the abstract boundaries that the film constructs formulates a destabilisation of pro-neoliberal discourses.

### ***3.3 Spatial Boundaries in a Neoliberal Context***

In his analysis, van Veuren states that 'the image of the border and its traversal is crucial [to *District 9*'s] symbolic use of the city, the body and social relations' (2012: 572), theorising that the film's narrative exists within 'well-known structures of the segregated apartheid city: the high-rise inner city, the quiet white suburb and the black township' (ibid.: 575).<sup>94</sup> Taking this into account, it is important to now explore van Veuren's claim further in order to discern to what extent it may be considered accurate and ascertain whether it can be contextualised within a neoliberal framework.

*District 9*'s physical boundaries appear to be established at the beginning of the film, observable most prominently in the title shot of the alien township. Here, director Blomkamp employs a bird's eye view shot to draw the audience's attention to a heavily fortified border running vertically down the left-hand side of the screen, which works to segregate District 9 from the metropolitan city (see figure 3.3.1).

Regarding the township itself, this study is inclined to agree with Nel, who writes that District 9 can be characterised as a typical 'contemporary, urban, African ghetto; dirty, claustrophobic, and litter-strewn, with nightmarish labyrinths and alleys' (2012: 552). Furthermore, the representation of the slum in this way, and the labyrinthic decay of its landscape, can be suggested to illustrate another potential example of Said's 'colonised' space

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<sup>94</sup> See Easthope on 'the cinematic representation of the city-as-space' (1997).



Figure 3.3.1: Shot of a border dividing the District 9 slum from Johannesburg.

(1994: 61), with the township existing in binary contrast to the rational order of Johannesburg, perhaps signifying ‘metropolitan space’ in this case.<sup>95</sup>

However, in what can be suggested to manifest a variation of Said’s construct, as discussed van Veuren observes that the Johannesburg city of *District 9* is strictly divided into three distinct territories. To analyse this further, we need to closely scrutinise the travails of protagonist Wikus who, throughout the film can be seen to desperately go to any lengths to reverse his mutation into alien ‘prawn’ and reunite with his wife Tania (Vanessa Haywood).

Harlow discusses how certain films and stories are ‘ideologically marked...in their Fanonian description of the divisions that separate the native town from the city’ (1994: 75), and this would appear to be the case in *District 9*. To explain, in the scene where Tania organises a pleasant dinner party to celebrate the protagonist’s promotion, before cutting to the

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<sup>95</sup> A similar binary can be invariably observed in other science fiction features; *The Hunger Games* series (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015), with its depiction of Panem’s ordered capital city ‘Capitol’ versus the dilapidated ruin of the ‘thirteen districts’, demonstrates a good example of this.

shot inside the house we are able to observe that, unlike District 9 as seen in figure 3.3.1, the suburban street where Wikus' lives is rationally ordered – with straight roads and pavements, manicured gardens and clean driveways, indicating a more familiar 'civilised' space. Furthermore, while Wikus' suburban home environment contrasts with the disorder of District 9, the depiction of downtown Johannesburg – location of MNU headquarters, is fundamentally different in its construction to the other two spaces: physically urban, hectic and bustling; mentally militarised, bureaucratic and masculine; the building is located in the heart of Johannesburg's city centre – a location typically reserved for the power brokers of capitalist order in Hollywood filmic codes of reference.

At no point in *District 9* do we see any characters negotiate these spaces with any meaningful significance – except Wikus. Indeed, van Veuren claims that an infected Wikus appears to 'fall outside this scheme of physical classification in a collapse of obsessively maintained borders' (2012: 576), a process that begins after he accidentally ingests the mysterious alien fluid, which initiates his metamorphosis into a 'prawn'.

This blurs the rigid lines of segregation that *District 9* initially establishes as van Veuren suggests. For example, upon the realisation that Wikus is infected we see he is immediately rejected by his friends, family and colleagues. This is emphasized in the scene in which the escaping Wikus enters a crowded fast food restaurant while on the run from MNU. On the television inside the establishment, an emergency news broadcast warns the public not to approach the protagonist, claiming that the protagonist has been involved in prolonged sexual activity with the aliens and has consequently contracted some kind of infectious disease.

Aside from the symbolic reference to South Africa and the AIDS virus here, recognising Wikus' face from the press release, the outlet's terrified customers begin immediately emptying the restaurant out of fear of being 'contaminated'. Analysing this same scene, Valdez-Moses et al comment that the metamorphosis means that '[Wikus] is forced out of his comfort zone,

treated as if he is not human – his rights evaporate' (2010: 162). Once outside, this is reiterated further as wife Tania then calls him in tears to announce: 'Wikus, listen to me...I have something to say to you and it's not gonna be easy...I can't do this...I don't want you to hold me again...' Despite Wikus' pleas and claims that the reports of his indiscretion with the aliens is not true, Tanya ends the call abruptly. Next, fully aware of his social 'exclusion', Wikus then angrily attempts to chop off his already mutated alien arm with an axe.

This act is particularly noteworthy in that the arm can be said to have become a figurative indication of the protagonist's impending Otherness and a signification of his departure from his previous identity. The irrational act of self-mutilation that Wikus inflicts upon himself could be interpreted as a desperate attempt to once again reclaim this identity. Nel describes in more detail the symbolic value of Wikus' transformation:

The act of breaking, erecting and shifting borders enables a re-imagination of the established cultural, political and social spaces. For example, the world of orderly structure of the dominant hegemonic order as opposed to the chaotic racial ghetto on the periphery of Johannesburg. The imagined boundary between the living subject, the Self, and that which threatens the Self is consequently broken (2012: 558).

The collapse of this imagined boundary in *District 9* exposes both a racial hierarchy and a certain colonial mentality that remains at the core of the collective identity constructs today. It also perhaps demonstrates a palpable fear that a repeat of the 2008 global recession could re-occur sometime again in the near future in a global society whose economic structure is underpinned by the irrational 'gamble' that is speculative market investment.

Wikus' wife Tania in particular seeks to maintain this segregative order, implying on a number of occasions that she prefers a world where humans and aliens do not interact. For example, after initially stating that she does not want to see Wikus again, she phones her



husband a second time in tears declaring that she 'just wants everything back the way it was' before posing the question: 'how can we go back?' Wikus also wants that same thing; moments after the call, when Christopher announces that the fluid can be used to both reverse Wikus' transformation in addition to powering the alien mothership, he enthusiastically declares 'I can go home, you can go home, you can take your boy, you can take all the prawns with you'. He even becomes a cold-blooded murderer in his attempt to maintain the segregationist order by killing a number of MNU employees when storming the organisation's headquarters with Christopher in search of the seized metamorphosis-reversing fluid.

After successfully obtaining it however, something interesting occurs: Christopher tells Wikus that it will be three years before he can 'fix' him, stating that he must first go back to his home world to get assistance for the population of subjugated extraterrestrials stranded on Earth. Wikus reacts angrily to this by knocking Christopher unconscious and recklessly attempting to fly the command module up to the alien mothership himself.

The irrational behaviour of Wikus here illustrates an intense desperation on the protagonist's part to stop at nothing in his attempt to regain his previous identity; it is important to stress that it is only when Wikus resigns himself to his impending Otherness that he turns his attention to the aliens' cause (this in itself could be interpreted to be part of a wider objective of ensuring his transformation back to human form when Christopher hypothetically returns to Earth). This study proposes that the violent act he commits upon Christopher demonstrates at once both a prejudiced contempt for a dehumanised Other – as well as a selfish dismissal of their predicament. In short, this supposed grand act of altruism displayed towards the prawns is ultimately a selfish act, something that Nel, van Veuren and others failed to observe.

It is important now to look closely at the protagonist in order to comprehend exactly what form of identity is constructed. Valdez-Moses et al believe that Wikus plays the role of the 'white man focalised as the point of identification' (2010: 162) in *District 9*; however, this

claim is not entirely accurate. Despite his role as the film's lead, the customary position onto which the desires of the viewer are often projected,<sup>96</sup> there can certainly be said to be an element of Otherness to Wikus' character from a typical Hollywood perspective.

This could simply be down to writer Blomkamp's South African heritage or more likely the relative creative freedom (see Wilkins 2010) he appears to have been given thanks to the presence of a high-profile industry figure in the shape of Peter Jackson supporting the production. Regardless, in portraying the part of an apartheid-era Afrikaans bureaucrat, Wikus does not fit the standard criteria of the typical Hollywood leading man. His thick Afrikaans accent and – compared with the likes of *Avatar's* Sully for instance – lack of masculine attributes at the narrative's outset, also highlights a degree of unconventionality to the character within Hollywood codes of lead-male categorisation.

As we have seen, previous to his mutation experience Wikus is presented as having lived a comfortable life in a nice quiet suburban area of Johannesburg with his wife Tania. The couple is depicted as being happily married and, in spite of not being 'a very smart boy', Wikus has attained a steady job at the MNU 'Department for Alien Affairs'. In general, he is characterised as being a relatively happy-go-lucky individual and seems to have the respect of his friends and family (minus Tania's father), who all take the time to attend a party organised in his honour to celebrate his promotion.

This investigation would be inclined to disagree once again with Valdez-Moses et al in their opinion of *District 9* 'celebrating the dramatic transformation of Wikus into a political hero who risks his life for the course of universal freedom and racial equality' (2010: 158) in consideration of the point discussed above concerning the protagonist's selfish attempts to reverse his transformation. For the first half of the story, Wikus clearly demonstrates a distinct prejudice towards the aliens, describing them constantly as 'prawns', reacting angrily to

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<sup>96</sup> See Ellingson (2001).

Christopher's son's claims that the two are the 'same' and also, after ordering that a shack containing a number of alien baby eggs be destroyed, blithely relaying to the camera the reason as to why eggs make a 'popping sound' as they melt over the shrieking cries of the infant prawns.

Later however, as his transformation intensifies, Wikus does appear to display shades of compassion towards the aliens. In this context the later scene in which he dons a mechanised alien battle suit is constructed by Blomkamp to be the moment when he ostensibly absolves himself of the prejudice he displayed earlier in the narrative. Initially, instead of helping the captured Christopher and passing up the opportunity to take on Koobus and his cronies, Wikus decides to run away from the MNU guards (as well as his apprehended acquaintance) – despite the protection that the suit he is wearing affords him. After a short while running, he stops, reflects, and manages to overcome the fear and intense self-loathing that has defined his mutation experience until this point, deciding to return with the intention of helping Christopher.

With the shot returning to Christopher and the MNU guards, an abrupt deadly laser blast kills two men before the action cuts to the suited Wikus running towards the camera all-guns blazing. Coupled with the fast attack escalation in dramatic music, the sight of Wikus in the suit approaching the camera head-on creates the effect of the protagonist growing in size, and with this his metamorphosis from reluctant to willing hero is confirmed.

This certainly draws attention to a sudden, newfound heroism in Wikus. Following this, he manages to prevent a rocket launched by Koobus from hitting the spaceship carrying Christopher and his son to the alien mothership, which consequently allows them to board, chart a course for home, and initiate some kind of future rescue mission. This selfless act also accentuates Wikus' newfound humane tolerance: ostensibly he has finally seen beyond his own

selfish ends and committed an act of empathetic kindness – something he could not do as he ruthlessly battled to prevent his gruesome mutation earlier in the film.

At this point, it might seem difficult to disagree with Valdez-Moses et al: Nel for one concurs with them, writing that an almost transformed alien Wikus must 'construct his identity on human level and give new content to his identity in order to articulate the essence of his humanness' (2012: 563). This study claims instead that, on the contrary, it veils the protagonist's past prejudices and selfishness in a similar way to that of Sully in *Avatar*. Thanks to his sacrifice, Wikus is seemingly absolved of his earlier prejudice towards the aliens and furthermore, also proves to Tania's father-in-law that he is in fact 'strong'<sup>97</sup> by taking on and overcoming the ultra-masculine MNU.

However, left alone and abandoned in District 9 there is nothing left for Wikus to do at the end of the film than to submit wholly to his encroaching Otherness; knowing full well that he cannot reverse his transformation to 'prawn' for the time being, van Veuren claims that the protagonist's new function is that of a 'sacrificial lamb' (2012: 581) for the viewer: he is 'thrown in at the deep end of the worst nightmares of white colonial anxiety and guilt' (ibid.), sacrificing himself for an audience who are subsequently absolved of their ongoing complicity in the real-life subjugation of the Other. While this motif appears to stabilise neoliberal patterns of identity, the next section of this investigation will look at colonial continuities in *District 9*, exploring the Christopher's portrayal as well as how the film's depiction of the aliens and the Nigerians supports or disavows long-standing neoliberal norms.

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<sup>97</sup> Tania's father is depicted from the film's outset as having a problem with Wikus' innocent personality and lack of typically masculine traits. Upon comforting his daughter as he informs her that Wikus cannot be saved from his 'infection', he says: 'You know Wikus, he never was very strong.'

### 3.4 Locating the Other

Valdez-Moses et al state that ‘minus the positive traits of Christopher and his son (who are intelligent, creative, courageous, civic-minded and compassionate), the average prawn corresponds to a racial stereotype every bit as negative as the Nigerian gangster: they are violent, uneducated, lazy, and dangerous’ (2010: 159). Taking this comment into consideration, it seems fair to state that Christopher does appear to display the paradigmatic requirement of noble savage Otherness (Weaver-Hightower 2014: 260) in the way that he exhibits characteristics that the Self appears to lack and/or desire. Furthermore, contrasting with the widespread tendency to label US and Western European society as having had its ‘traditional’ morals and values corrupted through the proliferation of individualism and materialism, Christopher cares for his ‘people’ and he holds an invariable innocence in his willingness to help strangers like Wikus.

However, we can detect colonial discourse in the alien’s lack of masculine characteristics, which are embodied principally in his role as a caring single-parent to a young child. This feminises Christopher, affirming a gender hierarchy in the character dynamic between himself and Wikus – who takes the role of patriarch. Building upon Valdez-Moses et al’s observation above, compared with Christopher the rest of the alien population themselves are generally depicted as typical savage Others: they are unruly and violent, spending their time scavenging huge piles of litter for food with little concern for law and order (see Nel 2012: 552). They are also presented as typically irrational: at one point handing over a mechanical battle suit to the Nigerian gangsters in exchange for 100 cans of cat food. This in particular is another aspect of the aliens’ representation that would correspond to colonial ideas of the Other as intellectually inferior.

Veracini labels *District 9* ‘regressive’ on account of the film’s depiction of Nigerians, which would support the opinions of Akunyili (2009) and Cole (2009) as introduced in 3.1 –

as well as that of Valdez-Moses et al (2010). In addition to the depiction of the aliens as 'savages', Veracini's description of the Nigerians as 'stereotyped and racialised figures, superstitious thugs with cannibalistic tendencies' (2011: 355) is also worth mentioning. In the same context, Nel also highlights the Nigerian gang's cannibalism as a classic Otherness signifier, remarking that they represent 'the unthinkable and unliveable zones of the social order – they do not qualify as full subjects of that reigning social order' (2012: 554).

This study would also agree with the above viewpoints, and add that Blomkamp 'Orientalises' the characters visually: displaying the gangsters with snakes wrapped around their bodies and electing to show the group's leader Obesandjo (Eugene Khumbanyiwa) involved in the practicing of witchcraft, eating alien body parts with the hope of acquiring their strength (see figure 3.4.1). This proposal would support Mavhungu and his discussion of African witchcraft as an 'unmistakable marker of the primitive Other' (2012: 12) as was discussed in 1.5. In consideration of this, it seems difficult not to concur with Rieder who



**Figure 3.4.1:** Nigerian gangsters practicing witchcraft.

claims that the 'vicious stereotyping of the Nigerians stabilises the noble savage binary of Christopher' (2011: 50).

Despite the fact that the film works hard to draw sympathy from the audience for the tragic state of their situation, the one-dimensional construct of the alien Other as discussed above would indicate that *District 9* is not a film that highlights the real-life difficulties of immigrants and minorities. Instead, like the Na'vi in *Avatar*, ostensive empathy for the aliens' miserable situation in the film lacks both a genuine sincerity as well as an informed comprehension from the filmmakers/studio bosses of what it must be like for people in similar situations.

Christopher and his son are the only two extraterrestrials permitted any real characterisation; and because of this, through the 'prawns' overall representation, one can detect a palpable fear on the part of the Self that the Other that may 'invade' or 'contaminate' the physical and mental space of the viewer. Sandercock discusses this theme in cinema and affirms quite rightly that:

Individual identity is often suffused with an anxiety that is projected onto the figure of the stranger, the alien, whose very presence seems to challenge and undermine the known social order. In numbers, strangers may come to be seen as an invading mass or tide that will engulf us, provoking primitive fears of annihilation, of dissolving of boundaries, the dissolution of identity (2005: 221f.).

This correlates with the discussion of alien representation in 1950s Hollywood science fiction as discussed in 1.4 where similar analogies were drawn. Elaborating upon the idea in a contemporary framework, a quote from Appadurai may help to articulate the point further: 'in an era of globalisation, violence against minorities could be viewed as a complex response to intolerable levels of uncertainty about group identities or other fears about growing inequality,

loss of national sovereignty, or threats to local security and livelihood' (2006: 7).<sup>98</sup> Taking the above into account, a link can be discerned here concerning the fear of Otherness in *District 9* and the issue of mass immigration.

In film, this threatened sense of selfhood as argued by Appadurai has manifested itself in an increase in the number of Hollywood stories in which monocultural identity constructs are being depicted as being under explicit threat from various external factors. This follows on from the discussion in 1.4 regarding motifs of male masculinity in Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) and immigration as a threat to US white identity in Sonnenfeld's *Men In Black* (1997).<sup>99</sup> Zombie features such as Forster's *World War Z* (2013), Synder's *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007) could also be considered useful examples when we take into account Dendle's discussion on the zombie as representative of our collective fear of loss of identity in the face of rampant globalisation (2011: 160). In this way, the Nigerian – but more so the alien prawns – may be said to allegorise anxieties toward mass immigration in *District 9* too. This largely discredits the arguments of Valdez-Moses et al who believe that the film brings attention to the discrimination of immigrants.

In *District 9*, these anxieties are primarily discernible in the reputed rapid breeding rate of the species themselves, with the alien's population explicitly communicated at three different points in the film, with each referral increasing drastically from the last in number. For example, upon first contact inside the mothership the population is conveyed to be roughly one million; at the time of the aliens' forced removal from District 9, Wikus indicates that it is 1.8 million, and finally at the end of the film once the relocation process to District 10 is complete, the populace is communicated to be 2.5 million 'and growing'. Adding this to the improper and often outrageous behaviour of the aliens (again minus noble savage Christopher)

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<sup>98</sup> Cornea (2007: 188), as discussed in chapter one, also follows a similar theory.

<sup>99</sup> See Whelehan et al (1999).



*District 9* appears reinforce popular conservative stereotypes of the immigrant as an inferior Other.

Around the release of *District 9* – and still today – immigration is a prominent political issue in South Africa, with the nation's government under pressure from right-wing parties to increase its border controls to counteract the perceived threat of cheap migrant labour willing to undercut domestic workers (see Nkosi 2015: n.p.).<sup>100</sup> On top of discriminatory rhetoric in the South African media, the United States also has taken a considerably more concrete, bipartisan hard-line approach to rising Hispanic immigration in the last five years: in addition to the heightened political rhetoric of US president Donald Trump, the Obama administration also physically deported close to two million Latinos.<sup>101</sup> Linking the imprudent nature of this policy to the idea that an imagined, predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon core is essential to neoliberal identity and global relations of power, *District 9* appears to reinforce anti-immigration sentiments quite explicitly in its depiction of the prawns.

### 3.5 Concluding Remarks

Blomkamp dedicates a large part of *District 9*'s story to denouncing the malpractices of multinationals, big business and the encroaching influence of these organisations on world politics. In terms of fundamental neoliberal criticism, MNU are depicted in a negative light throughout the narrative (see 3.2), with the overall portrayal of the corporation indicating that *District 9* follows *Avatar* in its attempts to explicitly chastise military brutality and drawing attention to a focus by large corporations on profit over humanity. Blomkamp's comments in

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<sup>100</sup> For further reading see Peberdy (2001).

<sup>101</sup> The aggressive policy was the subject of an episode of the *Al Jazeera* documentary series *Fault Lines*, which revealed that the Obama administration deported close to two million Latino immigrants from 2012 to 2014 for various past offences. Some were as trivial as minor traffic violations that were in some cases received over twenty years earlier. Many of the individuals interviewed in the documentary reported being stopped by law enforcement and deported to a facility in Mexico within 24 hours of their arrest without American border authorities notifying their families (*Al Jazeera* 2014).

interview would also support this stance (see *Empire Magazine* 2009: 31). In particular, the exposure of MNU's illegal experimentation program at the film's climax does seem constructed to humiliate the organisation publically.<sup>102</sup> There is a contradiction here however in the way in which the embarrassment that the whole affair would potentially cause MNU conceals the high probability of the organisation's continued involvement in the relocation of the aliens to so-called District 10.<sup>103</sup> This is not elaborated upon or explored in any more detail at the film's climax.

Regardless, the violent behaviour of Koobus and the presentation of MNU as a corporation driven by monetary greed at the expense of alien (coded human) life points to a firm renunciation of US-led<sup>104</sup> militarised neocolonialism. In this regard, a linkage can be made with Cameron's *Avatar*, which disavows the same system, adding to discussion by Veracini (2011) Primary antagonist Colonel Quartich can also be compared with *District 9*'s Koobus (see Rieder 2011), whose behaviour would perhaps have been acceptable in a

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<sup>102</sup> A comparison with this outcome can be again drawn here with Jones' *Moon* (2009) and the mining corporation 'Lunar Industries', who like MNU suffer the ignominy of public exposure of an unethical practice and a resulting drop in stock value. In *Moon*, Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell) is, unknown to the general public back on Earth, one of a long line of clones with a genetically engineered three-year life span employed to oversee operations on an automated lunar facility that mines a precious renewable energy source named 'Helium-3'. He believes however that he is nearing the end of a three-year contract and he will soon be able to return home to his wife and daughter. As the cloning scandal is exposed at the end of the film by one of the Sam clones who has escaped back to Earth, the ensuing media inquest focuses on the unethical practices of the board of directors at 'Lunar Industries'. They are revealed to have suffered the indignity of a major crash in stock value. Despite this ending, *Moon* is an example of a film that stops short of questioning the validity of the neoliberal model. What we can be sure of is that despite the cloning scandal, the mining of Helium-3 will certainly not cease. From the very beginning of the film we are made aware that, through capitalistic practices, the problem of renewable energy and long-term environmental degradation on Earth has been solved, ergo the validity of neoliberalism is confirmed as superior before any critique of it can begin in earnest.

<sup>103</sup> District 10 is described by Wikus as 'more like a concentration camp' than a home. Further comparisons with South African history can be drawn here regarding the concentration camps that were established by the British during the Second Boer War (1899-1902).

<sup>104</sup> In *District 9*'s opening scene, the film's docu-style introduction underlines the neoliberal milieu to the narrative in the comments of correspondent Grey Bradnam (Jason Cope) who conveys: 'to everyone's surprise, the ship didn't come to a stop over Manhattan, or Washington, or Chicago...' Here, the character explicitly indicates that one would expect an alien species to gravitate to Earth's technological, intellectual and military hub if they were to make contact with the human race. In the same interview, Bradnam also states that 'there was a lot of international pressure on us at the time...' regarding the operation to remove the aliens from the hovering ship. Whether these lines were included in order to conciliate the (US) Hollywood market remains unclear but it certainly outlines an overarching socio-political 'gaze' to *District 9* as one that reflects 'a popular mythology of the US as the metaphoric centre of the world' (Weaver-Hightower 2006: 304).

colonial/apartheid past, but has now clearly evolved into the unacceptable face of brutal imperial violence.

In this way the study would concur with Rieder's claims that characters like Koobus and Quaritch do appear to play some form of symbolic role in 'drawing upon a deep reservoir of popular resentment' (2011: 44) regarding the brutality of twenty-first century US military expansionism. Upon further analysis of other Hollywood films, it would also add Colonel Bagley (Tony Goldwyn) from Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2004), Colonel Tavington (Jason Isaacs) from Emmerich's *The Patriot* (2000), and Governor Ratcliffe (David Ogden Stiers) from Gabriel and Goldberg's *Pocahontas* (1995) to the list.

However, despite *District 9* appearing to follow what could be described as the widespread Hollywood tendency to demonise individual representatives of US military-industrial complex and corrupt political elites in the wake of the various crises of the twenty-first century (Eberwein 2004: 139), the raw emotion that Koobus's deep racial hatred of the aliens induces indicates that the character fulfils the role of a scapegoat for atrocities committed in the name of (neo)colonial expansionism – rather than a figure who may help the audience better comprehend their ongoing (indirect) complicity in propagating this form of neoliberal violence. In order to achieve this, this study would suggest more characterisation in the construction of similar primary antagonists in Hollywood. By reverting to melodramatic excess, Koobus simply becomes a convenient object of blame.

During the film's opening scenes, in which *District 9*'s wider story arc is articulated to the audience, black residents of the city are shown complaining about the aliens in the same fashion as apartheid-era white citizens protested about the black populace. This ostensibly indicates that South Africa's black population have internalised the same prejudices to which they were subjected to during apartheid – and are now inflicting them upon the aliens. While Heller-Nicholas (2011) and Vaughan (2009) would point to this as a shrewd allegorisation of

apartheid and contemporary right-wing populist politics, this investigation claims instead that this societal prejudice toward the aliens may illustrate a neoliberal underpin to *District 9*. To elaborate on this, it is useful to reference an interview Blomkamp gave to Toronto's *The Globe and Mail* around the time of *District 9*'s release where he discussed the ongoing prejudice in twenty-first century South African society.

Just everything that goes on in that country – xenophobia, the collapse of Zimbabwe and the flood of illegal immigrants into South Africa, and then how you have impoverished black South Africans in conflict with the immigrants. All that amounts to a very unusual situation (Vaughan 2009: n.p.).

As was analysed in the previous chapter (2.5), the Na'vi unwittingly remained imprisoned in a colonial discourse despite their exiling of the corporate capitalist RDA from their planet. Ostensibly ridding the cruel corporate organisation from Pandora and liberating themselves from the RDA's colonialism, in actuality, from the very moment the humans arrived, their true choice was either: be saved by the benevolent neoliberalism of Sully and his friends – or be destroyed by the neocolonial agenda of the RDA. In *District 9*, the dilemma of how to solve the alien problem exposes a similar neoliberal discourse.

As Veracini correctly identifies, the aliens are seen as an 'obstacle' (2011: 361), and it is this that limits the potential of the film as one that subverts established neoliberal patterns. For example, city's residents want them relocated out of the city to District 10 and Wikus also hopes that by helping them, they will be able to leave Johannesburg. Moreover, MNU do not appear to be willing to look for a diplomatic solution despite the obvious options that are available to them: Veracini proposes that the aliens could be utilised as workers (ibid.) for instance; more so they could even be 'used' as soldiers taking into account that fact that only they can use the advanced weaponry that MNU desires so much to exploit. Instead, at the

climax of the film, as Christopher and his son are trying to get to the command module to make their escape, Koobus can be seen determined to prevent them from leaving Earth – illustrating the colonial desire to dominate the Other. Considering the socio-economic problems that the aliens bring to Johannesburg, he could have just allowed the other aliens to return to their home planet with Christopher.

Regardless Wikus manages to foil Koobus and Christopher and his son are able to dock with the waiting mothership. In the opinion of Valdez-Moses et al, the protagonist's actions here 'celebrates the dramatic transformation of Wikus into a political hero who risks his life for the course of universal freedom and racial equality' (2010: 158). However, while such an outcome might align to conventional white saviour motifs seen in other Hollywood sci-fi films like *Avatar*, Emmerich's *Stargate* (1994), and Burton's *Planet of the Apes* (2001), this investigation argues that the above statement is problematic when we observe how Wikus is rejected by a particular form of social identity once his mutation commences. From this point in the narrative onwards, *District 9* presents Wikus' desperately attempting to reverse his transformation to 'prawn' so that he can once again be accepted back into society. This is sought after at the expense of almost 1.8 million extraterrestrials, exemplified in the scene where Wikus crudely dismisses the aliens' situation by knocking Christopher – their one chance for salvation, unconscious in order to fly up to the alien mothership himself.

Despite the protagonist's actions, *District 9* quite clearly attempts to designate MNU as the main hindrance to the aliens' freedom, diverting attention away from the fact that Wikus was the actually their primary obstacle: an individual selfish in his desire to reverse his own metamorphosis. In spite of this, Christopher fulfils his function as a construct of colonial discourse by assuming the role of the grateful and innocent native (Hall 1986) in thanking Wikus for his help and promising to return within three years to 'fix him'. In this way, Christopher follows colonised stereotypes in other Hollywood films like Lord Katsumoto (Ken

Watanabe) in Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2004) and Kicking Bird (Graham Greene) in Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990).

The manner in which Wikus is ostensibly upheld as a hero is interesting in the context of how *District 9* affirms neoliberal identity constructs, the film can be suggested to distance the Self from corporate militarism in its rejection of MNU's cruel inhumanity, but the method in which it glosses over Wikus' selfish actions – portraying the protagonist as a saviour to the grateful Other, signals that *District 9* reconstructs themes associated with colonial discourse.

This study accepts van Veuren's position (2012: 572) that *District 9* disseminates three distinct spaces within Johannesburg: the District 9 township (as inhabited by the aliens), a 'downtown' urbanised territory occupied Multinational United, and a space of stable, suburban comfort – where we find the home of Wikus and his wife Tania. The location of MNU headquarters in the heart of Johannesburg city is significant in the context of *District 9*'s anti-neoliberal argument as it is here where plans for the forced relocation of the township population are designed, where illegal biological experiments are performed, and where kidnapped aliens are brutally tortured. The immoral actions taking place here distances the corrupt corporate city from a pleasant suburban innocence encapsulated in Wikus and Tania's quiet ordered home. Symbolically comparable to Said's idea of colonial space (1994: 61), the squalid conditions of the township and the irrational behaviour of the alien Other within, further distinguishes District 9 from the city and suburbia, completing the triangulated spatial structure.

By ingesting the fluid, Wikus blurs the clear lines of separation constructed by the film, in particular establishing the distinct prospect of intimate contact with the alien Other. As mentioned above, the majority of *District 9*'s plot focuses on Wikus' desperate attempts to reverse his transformation to prawn so that he can once again be accepted back into the suburban society that has rejected him.

In this way, *District 9* draws upon an anxiety regarding the possibility of exclusion for any individual that does not maintain the strict boundaries of mental and physical segregation with the Other. The film's fundamental message is one of rejection (as is done quite explicitly in the case of Wikus) if this is not upheld. *District 9* on the whole displays a cognitive dissonance with regard to how it sees its relationship with that Other, promoting a socially responsible and humane attitude towards interaction but certainly not sanctioning complete engagement. As van Veuren states, Wikus ultimately becomes a 'sacrificial lamb' for the audience (2012: 581), with the character's transformation drawing attention to what might happen if the Self is too intimate with the Other.

This investigation adds a new paradigm of research to the literature on *District 9*, presenting insights into the way in which the story might support neoliberal identity. The portrayal of Wikus' desperate situation and the film's ultimately compensatory attack upon corporate militarism serves to justify neoliberal ideals despite the ostensive liberal agenda of Blomkamp. Comparing the film with *Avatar*, which can be described as a feature that largely conveys an escape fantasy (see Elsaesser 2011) through a typical 'going native' motif, *District 9* transmits a scenario where the viewer is almost made to feel 'grateful' that they are constituents of the neoliberal order – remaining indebted to the 'natural' hierarchy inherent to a particular form of identity established in colonial discourse. *District 9* portrays Wikus' comfortable existence with wife Tania as being forcefully taken away from him, which through the process of his transformation into an alien Other, reinforces neoliberal superiority.

This scenario perhaps demonstrates an example of the core identity and principles of neoliberalism being upheld after various economic, environmental and socio-political crises that have occurred since the turn of the twenty-first century have brought the supposed supremacy of the system under sharp criticism. At the time of the film's release, a year after the world financial crisis began and amid ongoing conflicts in the Middle East wherein the

imperial/resource strategic ambitions of the Anglo-US coalition were under intense public questioning, *District 9* defends neoliberalism through the dissemination of an essentially inferior alternative: the miserable existence of the Other.

While we may be tempted to point out that *District 9* brings attention to the fact that this miserable life has been caused by exclusion, marginalisation and mistreatment by humans, representations of the aliens as savage, instinct-led, and irrational beings – in addition to one-dimensional depictions of MNU as inherently malevolent, immoral and corrupt – means that the spectator is ultimately not invited to self-reflect upon their own complicity in such real-life situations of neocolonial subjugation and domination.

In this case, as political elites in many countries scapegoat immigrants for their neoliberal economic policy failures, the truth that audiences must confront is that instances of apathetic disavowal at supposedly archaic apartheid-style practices seen in film and discussed in right-wing media conceals a very real possibility of a return to the darkest moments of historical white racist brutality here and now.



## 4. Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium*

### 4.1 Preliminary Remarks

In addition to its financial success, Neill Blomkamp's big budget *District 9* follow-up *Elysium* has been selected for analysis because of the centrality of wealth inequality and environmental devastation to the main plot. Released five years after the 2008 financial crash in 2013, *Elysium* plays upon negative economic potentialities of the global recession through a depiction of a dystopian Los Angeles as part of wider, economically shattered Earth devoid of almost all infrastructure. In discussion on the subject with Hiscock of *The Telegraph*, director Blomkamp said of *Elysium*: 'the entire film is an allegory. I tend to think a lot about wealth discrepancy. People have asked me if I think this is what will happen in 140 years, but this isn't science fiction. This is today. This is now' (2013: n.p.).

Set in 2154, *Elysium* tells the story of a polluted, overpopulated and environmentally-ravaged Earth that has been abandoned by the minority of its most privileged residents, who have fled the planet to live in relative comfort and luxury on a giant, orbiting space habitat eponymously known as Elysium. Through an analysis of the mechanics of this spatial dichotomy, this chapter of the thesis seeks to determine in how far this portrayal of an underprivileged Earth versus a prosperous (almost) utopian Elysium can be suggested to critique neoliberalism. Thus, the objectives of this inquiry are to 1) interrogate to what extent neoliberalism is criticised in the film through an examination of the spatial construction of Elysium and Los Angeles and 2) investigate the importance of lead protagonist Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) in terms of stabilising or destabilising neoliberal patterns.

*Elysium* was not quite as well-received critically as its Academy Award nominated predecessor. Blomkamp himself has since admitted rather explicitly during an interview about

2015 project *Chappie* that he 'fucked up' *Elysium*'s script, focusing too much on the film's visual effects and concepts and not taking the time to fully develop a cohesive story-arc. He said: 'I feel like I executed all of the stuff that could be executed, like costume and set design and special effects very well. But, ultimately, it was all resting on a somewhat not totally formed skeletal system, so the script just wasn't there; the story wasn't fully there' (Ryan 2015: n.p.). Nonetheless, *Elysium* still managed to take \$286 million at the box office and placed 26th on the list of highest grossing films worldwide in 2013 (*Box Office Mojo* 2015b) – indicating significant commercial success.

In the mainstream press, it seems fair to say that the majority of discussions on *Elysium* in some way recognise its anti-capitalist outlook *vis-à-vis* the damaging role that US neoliberal expansionism plays in exacerbating wealth inequality. *Uwire Text* praised Blomkamp's attempt to address the US political hot potatoes of universal healthcare and Latino immigration by claiming that the South African-Canadian 'is one of the very few directors who seem to care about the social and economic struggles of the people they are trying to speak to' (2013: 1). This apparent criticism of social issues upset US conservative commentator *Newsmax*, who described *Elysium* as 'sci-fi socialism' (Debruge 2013: n.p.). Recktenwald was critical of Blomkamp, accusing the director of inciting class warfare with his 'cynical oversimplification of complicated social issues'; commenting that the story's 'stubborn, monochromatic lens treats any actual economic injustice with all the sincerity of a Saturday morning cartoon' (2013: n.p.). Foundas praised the film, stating that *Elysium* 'advances one of the more openly socialist political agendas of any Hollywood movie in memory, beating the drum loudly not just for universal healthcare, but for open borders, unconditional amnesty and the abolition of class distinctions as well' (2013: n.p.).

The feature has been somewhat under-scrutinised by scholars, however the small body of critical discussion available on *Elysium* (Hampton 2014, Carlton 2013, Peck 2014, Mirrlees

and Pedersen 2016), does help to contextualise this particular debate. Hampton points to a socio-political function in the same milieu as this thesis seeks to explore when he labels the film's outcome 'a big self-esteem booster shot for those affluent white folks who depend on cheap immigrant labour for their maids and gardeners and nannies but want to feel good about themselves in the bargain' (2014: 57). Peck debates lead character Max Da Costa *vis-à-vis* the inhumane Elysian elite and their exploitation of Earth's impoverished population, claiming that the protagonist is charged with challenging this unjust society and the hegemonic dominance that results from it (2014: 36).

This might be considered a response from *Elysium*'s filmmakers to prominent global issues that were perceived to require urgent attention in the media and news at the time of the film's production. Mirrlees and Pedersen discuss this:

The 2012 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, for example, hosted a 'Seeds of Dystopia' panel and released a *Global Risks Report* that documented human misery, hardship and despair. The Report surveys global unemployment, rampant poverty, income inequality, market volatility, climate change, food and water shortages, population growth, slumification, terrorism and failed states to highlight the dystopic planetary situation we face (2016: 308f.).

Indeed, each of the issues mentioned in the above quote are alluded to in some form in *Elysium*, with a particularly strong focus on wealth inequality, worker exploitation and environmental ruin. Taking this into account, this investigation will explore in how far this can be linked to declining confidence in US neoliberalism.

Mirrlees and Pedersen also further analyse the dystopian scenario constructed in *Elysium*, commenting that the film 'renders capitalism's rigidifying class division as a global spatial metaphor, with immobile workers gazing upwards at Elysium and the mobile Elysian owning

class literally looking down upon them (ibid.: 309). Holiday also debates space as an important component to the narrative of *Elysium*:

*Elysium* routinely enacts a series of oppositions to visually and thematically demarcate the environments of the astral, pristine Elysium and the sun-bleached destitution of a devastated Los Angeles. Order and chaos, abundance and plenty, security and savagery, comfort and discomposure (2014: 435).

While scholars have touched upon the film in relation to – among other themes – wealth inequality *vis-à-vis* the 2008 global economic crisis, there remains a lack of analytic literature on *Elysium* regarding its portrayal of neoliberalism in a postcolonial context. Furthermore, the way in which it is incorporated into identity constructs within contemporary Hollywood sci-fi cinema in response to a crisis of confidence in the model is also an issue that has been overlooked by scholars.

In the following subchapters this study seeks to elaborate upon the growing literature around the work of Blomkamp with a neoliberal investigation into *Elysium*. 4.2 initiates that debate with a discussion of the film's spatial composition in response to Holiday (2014) and Mirrlees and Pedersen's (2016) works, and then considering Foundas' (2013) claims that *Elysium* should be regarded as a liberal feature, 4.3 examines the extent to which this perspective is disseminated in the narrative, while 4.4 concludes this analysis with an in-depth interrogation of protagonist Max Da Costa in order to ascertain in how far the character reinforces or deconstructs colonial and neoliberal norms.

#### 4.2 Spatial Delineation in Elysium?

As was communicated in Holiday's review of the film, the depictions of the physical structures and character mentalities of those derived from Elysium and Earth lay in polar opposition. Undoubtedly, the use of spatial boundaries to accentuate territorial differences appears to be one technique that Blomkamp has a preference to employ in his films. Therefore, upon reflection of the findings of the investigation into *District 9*, it seems relevant to apply a similar framework of inquiry to the composition of the Elysian base and Earth here in order to discern the extent to which Holiday's claim is accurate. It may also assist in comprehending whether this constitutes some form of criticism of contemporary US neoliberal economic policy via the dissemination of space as 'an organising principle and a site of meaning' (Jones 2015: 9). On *Elysium*, Peck claims that:

[The Elysian base] acts as a loose representation of the American dream – the green lawns, the garden parties, the nice houses. Meanwhile, many of the people on Earth are willing to do anything it takes to get to Elysium and realise that dream – even in its simplest form, as adequate healthcare (2014: 13).

Peck's observation is indeed a decisive one, the American Dream as an achievable ambition remains a key element to the justification of US neoliberalism and is crucial to its continued survival (see Blazek and Glenday 2005 and Beach 2007). Spielberg's *The Terminal* (2004), Muccino's *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and Hancock's *The Blind Side* (2009) as good examples of the degree to which the realisation of the American Dream remains an ideological stimulator in twenty-first century Hollywood. In how far this is so in *Elysium* will be investigated in detail now.

In contrast to the hypothesised triangulated spatial structure seen in *District 9*, *Elysium* follows more closely *Avatar* in its dissemination of a dual territorial dichotomy. By employing a flying moving wide shot to illustrate the polluted, ghettoised state of Los Angeles of 2154, Blomkamp establishes this binary within the first two minutes of the film. Gunshot fire as well as the sound of police sirens are included in the background to accentuate the extent to which this future society is in chaos and ruin. Initially, the observing audience does not know that the turbulent urban environment in which they are being introduced to is Los Angeles, nevertheless the director confirms this with a sharp increase in the background music over a wide shot of the ruins of what was downtown LA (see figure 4.2.1).



Figure 4.2.1: Spatial binary between Earth and the Elysian habitat.

The *mise-en-scène* here certainly corroborates with Mirrlees and Pedersen's comments in that it could be suggested to reflect the mood of 'human misery, hardship and despair' (2016: 308) prevalent in the popular press around the period of *Elysium*'s production. Holiday asserts that the depiction of a dystopian Earth as one that is no longer fit for satisfactory human habitation, is indicative of a wider shift in Hollywood narratives, and has become 'the common currency of contemporary science fiction cinema' (2014: 433):

From *Twelve Monkeys* (Gilliam 1995), *28 Days Later* (Boyle 2002) and *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007) to *The Book of Eli* (the Hughes Brothers 2010), *After Earth* (Shyamalan 2013), *World War Z* (Forster 2013) and *Oblivion* (Kosinski 2013), the number of films trading in the terminal destruction of humanity has proliferated (ibid.).<sup>105</sup>

Regardless the images in which the viewer is presented with *Elysium*'s outset demonstrates that the film intends to follow the same format rather than break with it.

In comparison to the alarming, anxiety-inducing nature of the background music in the Earth scene, the visual introduction to the Elysium space habitat is quite different. A musical *calando*<sup>106</sup>— followed by a subdued low-tempo melody, accentuates the contrasting nature of the base in comparison with Earth. Visually, Elysium is ordered, planned and technologically advanced; stylistically it follows more traditional images of the futuristic urban metropolis as seen in other Hollywood science fiction films like Buenos Aires in Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997), and San Francisco in Abrams' *Star Trek* series (2009, 2013, 2016).

The mysterious predilection of the piece also stresses the supposed unfamiliarity of the habitat to the viewer. In addition to this, Elysium's large houses, extravagant gardens and the

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<sup>105</sup> In the same context, Attebery and Hollinger write that dystopian images of 'ecological degradation, late capitalist exploitation and urban anarchy over visions of totalitarian governance' (2013: 215) – widely accepted by film scholars to have been popularised in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) – are central to the narrative in many contemporary sci-fi films.

<sup>106</sup> A *calando* is an Italian musical term that indicates a gradual decrease in both the tempo and volume of a piece (see Kraemer 2017).

glamorous lifestyles of its inhabitants, indicates with some justification that the Elysian residents are indeed living the (American) Dream.

From this perspective, Peck discusses the introduction of Elysium and the method that the director employs in presenting the base as an object of enticement: 'the minor glimpse that Blomkamp offers audiences...is also a rhetorical strategy, presenting Elysium as something foreign and unattainable, while strengthening audiences' views of Earth as something familiar' (2014: 7).

This claim can be further exemplified materially in the unlimited access that the residents of Elysium have to advanced medical technology<sup>107</sup> that is able to cure any disease and keep the habitat's citizens looking permanently young and beautiful. At this early stage of the debate, this study would contest Peck's claim and instead suggest that considering socio-economic context within which the film was produced, the Elysian space and its inhabitants more so represent an allegorical manifestation of the so-called 'super rich' – and not a representation of the 'average citizen' who has realised the American Dream through hard work as per the traditional narrative. If one were to accept this point, it would be important to remember that the super-rich are a socio-economic group who were brought into public discourse as part of the fallout from the 2008 economic crash, and have since been criticised in popular media for their selfish accumulation of financial and business capital in the run up to (and indeed after) the recession.

This assertion can be supported in manner in which *Elysium* seems to draw upon negative media portrayals of the super-rich '1%' by depicting the Elysian elite as a malevolent, greedy, self-interested group of individuals whose predominant intention is to preserve and expand upon their economic and political power. This criticism becomes more apparent when we

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<sup>107</sup> In itself an explicit criticism of the cost of private medical care in the United States – as was discussed by the director himself in an interview with *The Telegraph*'s Hiscock (2013).



analyse two particular characters in prominent positions within Elysian society: Armadyne CEO John Carlyle (William Fichtner) and Defence Secretary Delacourt (Jodie Foster).

Delacourt is depicted as particularly ruthless in her disdain for Earth's citizens and the draconian measures that she is prepared to implement in order to keep them out of Elysium. Those measures can in turn be said to echo the strict immigration policies of actual right-wing political figures in the United States around the time *Elysium* was made. To explain, after employing rogue mercenary Agent Kruger (Sharlto Copley) to destroy two approaching spaceships carrying a group of desperate Earth citizens, Delacourt then orders Elysium security police to apprehend and deport the escaped members of a third ship that managed to breach the Elysian frontier. Because of her unorthodox methods in employing a dangerous psychopath like Kruger, she is then brought before the habitat's ruler President Patel (Faran Tahir) for reprimand. Defending her actions, she exclaims to him:

If you had children, you would behave in a manner that is more conducive to the longevity of this habitat. I understand that it is not the fashion to think and act as I do, I understand that perfectly. But when they come for your house, the house you built for your children, your children's children...it won't be PR and campaign promises that keep them out! It will be me!

Through the depiction of a passionate justification of her extremist actions, the scene can perhaps be said to play upon liberal anxieties concerning the advancing popularity of far-right political parties in the US and Europe at the time. In the framework of US politics, it would appear Delacourt's words here are articulated to parallel the actions Arizona governor Jan Brewer for instance who in 2010, enacted a stringent immigration law that would make the failure to carry immigration documents a crime and give police the right to arrest individuals suspected of being in the US illegally (see Archibold 2010).

Delacourt's words are also uncannily prophetic of current US president Donald Trump also, who called for a blanket ban on Muslims travelling to the United States in light of the Paris terror attacks during his election campaign and attempted to enact it upon entering office. Other examples of similar Delacourt-style rhetoric used by actual politicians can be discerned quite readily in today's media: another comment made by Trump regarding the border wall with Mexico has distinct resonance in the context of *Elysium* and Delacourt:

You're going to have a deportation force, and you're going to do it humanely. Don't forget...that you have millions of people that are waiting in line to come into this country and they're waiting to come in legally. And I always say the wall, we're going to build the wall. It's going to be a real deal. It's going to be a real wall (Ortiz 2016: n.p.).

Whereas Delacourt primarily seeks to maintain the base's fragile exclusivity, John Carlyle – *Elysium* architect and founder of weapons manufacturer 'Armadyne Corp.' – takes the role of a malicious, ungrateful multi-billionaire. Carlyle's nefarious personality is demonstrated to the audience primarily in the manner that he talks down to his employees at the factory where protagonist Max works. In fact, this is emphasized in the way in which he literally looks down on them, often observing production from his second floor glass office as the workers assemble mechanical police officers on the factory line.

Carlyle's heartless character is primarily illustrated however in the scene where protagonist Da Costa is informed by a medibot that he has only five days to live after being exposed to a lethal dose of radiation. Carlyle leaves his office to see why production in the factory has stopped and seeing the dying Da Costa lying on the table, he exclaims: 'shouldn't his skin fall off or something? ...I don't want to replace the bedding in there, just get him out'.

Carlyle functions in stark contrast to the positive role that billionaires play in conservative Hollywood features like Favreau's and Black's *Iron Man* series (2008, 2010, 2013)

and Nolan's *Batman* trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012). In addition to the attention given to issues of healthcare and wealth inequality, this highlights a liberal perspective to *Elysium* – something suggested by Debruge (2013) and Foundas (2013) also. Indeed, the extent to which the mentalities of both Delacourt and Carlyle as political/corporate power figures contradict with the affable public profiles of billionaires like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk – as well as the other characters in *Elysium* like Da Costa, the protagonist's love interest Frey (Alice Braga) and particularly underworld crime boss Spider (Wagner Moura), indicate reasonable evidence for an investigation into the extent to which *Elysium* criticises neoliberal mentalities.

The contemporary discourse with regard to the lifestyle of the super-rich and the unfamiliarity that their lifestyle and habits of consumption hold from the point of view of the '99%' is discussed by Flynn-Vencat who states:

The member's-only phenomenon is exploding into a new way of life, encompassing everything from private-banking coalitions to invitation-only health clinics. With security concerns growing and internet gossip capable of trashing global reputations in an instant, those with money are increasingly locking their entire lives behind closed doors. They dine privately, shop privately, view art privately; everything is private, private, private. Their contacts with the outside world are business and humanitarianism (2007: n.p.).<sup>108</sup>

The same mentality can certainly be said to be present here *in extremis* considering the desperate lengths to which Delacourt is willing to go to stop immigrants entering Elysium; even more so when we observe a day in the life of Carlyle who lives 'off-world' and jets down to Earth each morning in his ultra-sleek Bugatti 'space car'. Once at the Armadyne factory he

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<sup>108</sup> In the context of this chapter, the article also includes quite an interesting quote from the head of a luxury yacht company who, discussing the supply problems that his company has due to high demand for \$100 million vessels, states: 'we're basically in the business of building private islands that orbit the Earth' (ibid.).

spends his time almost entirely in his glass office, and when he does leave to visit the factory floor, he is invariably flanked by heavily-armed security robots. In this way, both characters can be considered reasonable manifestations of the Flynn-Vencat 'members-only' society, and as such, works to construct a boundary between the Elysians and the citizens of earth.

Further evidence for this idea of a segregative mental narrative reveals itself in a sense by the use of second languages on Earth and Elysium. The Elysians speak French – the traditional 'language of the Elite' in seventeenth century Europe, whereas the residents of Los Angeles on the other hand speak Spanish as their second language. In the case of the Elysian residents speaking French, this stylistic choice is surely intended to evoke a linkage to stereotypical connotations of a historical European 'high culture', while the decision to 'Latinise' the LA (and therefore wider Earth) on the other hand appears symbolically associated to contemporary negative right-wing media portrayals of mass Hispanic immigration to the United States, and the discursive construction of the Latino Other as a second-class citizen (see Chavez 2013). This construct could again be correlated to the rhetoric of right-wing US Republican party members as discussed previously in this section of the chapter (see Ortiz 2016).

Turning to the protagonist, Da Costa can be said to be experiencing similar signifiers of anxiety and alienation as *Avatar*'s Sully. The viewer is introduced to Max with a close up shot as he stares into a mirror, reflecting on his childhood experiences in an orphanage. This is followed by a wider shot of the character standing alone in his dilapidated Los Angeles shack as he prepares for another day at work on the line in one of Carlyle's factories (see figure 4.2.2).

This shot – all the more significant by virtue of an absence of background music, can be said to emphasize the isolation of Da Costa, who seems to have suffered extensively from this societal breakdown. The *mise-en-scène* encapsulates this – as do the comments made by a



**Figure 4.2.2:** Wide shot of Max's dilapidated house.

Sister at the orphanage when she refers to the fact that Max's criminal history of theft relates to a desire to sell the objects he has stolen in order to 'buy' his ticket to Elysium.

Early on, Blomkamp establishes the protagonist's discontented existence and accentuates the degree to which he can be considered an insignificant member of an apparent de-humanised working class.<sup>109</sup> He has a poorly paid job, working on the factory line assembling Elysium's robotic police force at Armadyne. He is regularly humiliated by his supervisor who in one instance, docks him half a day's pay for being late and tells him 'you're lucky to have this job' – despite the fact he was at hospital receiving treatment on his arm which was almost broken in an altercation with a heavy-handed mechanised police officer. Furthermore such an unfair punishment appears commonplace in the manner that Da Costa accepts the reprimand without protest.

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<sup>109</sup> In the context of this investigation, such a theme can be suggested to mirror the concerns that Adam Smith held about the creation of a capitalist society in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) (See 1.2, footnote 20).

Da Costa's daily struggle might be claimed to play upon apprehensions regarding the erosion of worker's rights and a response to accounts emerging in the mainstream press at the time of *Elysium*'s release concerning the unethical treatment of workforces in well-known large corporations – particularly the supposedly 'socially responsible' Apple and Amazon for instance (See Goldman 2015).

In the opinion of *Uwire Text*, the circumstances of Da Costa as an assembly line worker (the factory itself being the apotheosis of capitalist production) highlights an attempt by the filmmakers to draw attention to 'the ever-growing class gap, to healthcare, to worker's rights being taken away and/or being attacked' (2013: 1). At this early stage of the film, the scenario of Da Costa working a lowly job at the factory and the images of him wearily toiling away on the assembly line at Armadyne can also be claimed to exacerbate apprehensions concerning the lack of societal mobility and the employment role that the individual might be forced to undertake if an economic collapse on the scale portrayed in *Elysium* were to occur.

With the geo-economic division between Earth and Elysium in mind, it is useful to turn towards the events at the climax of the film when the reboot program is activated by a dying Da Costa. The shock of the sheer scale of data being downloaded from his brain to base's mainframe causes the protagonist to die, however the resulting system reset sees the whole population of Earth registered as citizens of the space habitat. This makes them eligible for the health care that so many people desperately need – not least Frey's daughter Matilda (Emma Tremblay) who has leukaemia and needs medical attention immediately.

In the final scene, countless shuttles full of medibots and Med-Bays can be seen descending to various locations on Earth including Los Angeles to treat the diseased and sick population. Here, a more explicit spatial binary construct than that put forward by Holiday (2014: 435) can be discerned in the manner that the images accentuate the immoral nature of the heartless Elysian authority figures who refused aid to the stricken citizens of Earth in the

first place. It quickly becomes clear as the shuttles touchdown that the Elysian government could have allowed the medibots to go to Earth and cure the afflicted population at any time, instead they chose not to allow this.

Rather, it takes a dying factory worker and a crime lord to instigate the altruistic act that saves them. In this way, this study propose that this stresses a delineation of identity, values and mentalities between the liberal audience, and the Elysian authority figures as represented by Delacourt and Carlyle. This demonstrates a criticism of high-level neoliberal governance that would certainly support the discussions of *Uwire Text* and Foundas (both 2013), both of whom think that *Elysium* is an anti-neoliberal film. However, there are a number of other elements in the film that must be investigated before this chapter is able to draw a definitive conclusion on this proposal.

#### **4.3 Neoliberalism with a Human Face in Elysium?**

The idea that someone who derives ethnically from outside the imagined 'white centre' (Weaver-Hightower 2006: 304) of US discursive constructs could ascend to govern over Elysium would appear to support claims from Debruge (2013) also that *Elysium* is constructed from a liberal perspective – this despite director Blomkamp claiming in interview that he is personally neither liberal nor conservative in his political inclination (see Yarm 2013).

In this context, the role of President Patel presiding over a multicultural council equally represented by men and women could certainly be suggested to signify a progressive inclination on the Elysium base. Despite this, *Elysium* actually transmits mixed signals on its political disposition, demonstrating a good example of Godawa's description of 'movies as mixed bag of values and ideas' (2009: 26). On the one hand *Elysium* projects the government as a multiracial legislature with equal opportunity for all as mentioned, but at the same time there are certain laws, morals and values held by this administration that do not correspond to the idea of a progressive nation state. For example, while it might be acknowledged that

President Patel's appointment is representative of social progress, the base holds an authoritarian/conservative inclination: it has introduced the death penalty, notably hanging individuals who commit treason.

Moreover, as was discussed in 4.2, the mandate given to Delacourt by President Patel is not to solve the humanitarian crisis down on Earth, instead it is to 'deal quietly' with immigrants that are attempting to get to *Elysium*. This scenario is interesting in that it can be linked to an incident in 2015 in which former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government was accused of granting the country's coastguard with the authority to bribe the crew members of Australia-bound vessels carrying illegal immigrants to return to their respective ports of origin.<sup>110</sup>

Regardless, with Patel essentially taking the role of a typical self-serving twenty-first century neoconservative politician, the popular anti-elitist narrative is once again constructed in a prominent Hollywood sci-fi feature. In the character's actions the viewer is able to recognise comparable attitudes observable in actual politicians like Abbott, Tony Blair as discussed in 1.3, and to an extent, former US president Barack Obama in consideration of the evidence presented in the previously discussed *Al Jazeera* (2014) documentary (see 3.4).

Taking into account this anti-elitist propensity to *Elysium*, people smuggler Spider is an interesting character, mainly because of the manner in which the character's initial one-dimensionality as a stereotypical Hollywood film criminal diminishes as the film proceeds. His relevance to the story on the other hand greatly increases, and he ultimately becomes the individual responsible for initiating the reboot program after Da Costa's death, fulfilling the role of an anti-hero. From the analytical viewpoint of those who believe *Elysium* is an anti-

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<sup>110</sup> The allegation was put to Abbott's administration after a man that disembarked from a boat that had docked in Indonesia claimed that he witnessed a monetary transaction between a Royal Australian Navy (RAN) coastguard and the people smuggler in charge of the migrant ship of which he was aboard. Abbott himself did not deny that he had authorised this unorthodox method of immigration control (see *BBC News* 2015).



neoliberal film (*Uwire Text* 2013, Foundas 2013, Mirrlees and Pedersen 2016), Spider can be suggested to encapsulate a dissatisfaction with the stagnancy of contemporary US neoliberal politics and the perceived lack of meaningful change that has been achieved from it over the past few decades. In this way, as someone who makes a living exploiting the already misfortunate population of Earth by arranging for desperate families to be smuggled into Elysium in exchange for cash, Spider's criminal overlord status is overlooked as he becomes a hero for Earth's long-suffering underclass.

Film criticisms of the detrimental effect that neoliberalism has on the environment can be observed in a number of features over the last thirty years or so, Reynolds' *Waterworld* (1995), Kroyer's *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) and Soderbergh's *Erin Brockovich* (2000) display relevant early examples of this, with Cameron's *Avatar*, Emmerich's *2012* (2009), Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008) and Devlin's *Geostorm* (2017) highlighting more recent examples. In *Elysium* the same criticism is evident as we are introduced to images of a devastated twenty-second century Earth abandoned by the very minority of super-rich business owners and corporations who were responsible for exacerbating the planet's environmental problems in the first place (see figure 4.2.1). The chief offender is of course Armadyne Corp.: culpable for constantly pumping radioactive material into the Los Angeles air at the expense of the city's inhabitants.

Industrial pollution is an issue that *Elysium* focuses strongly upon, and in this framework, Earth's air quality is explicitly mentioned on two occasions. The first instance occurs during a video conference between Armadyne CEO Carlyle and some board members who are unhappy about the profitability of the company. After being pressed about Armadyne's general fiscal performance, Carlyle retorts: '...what do you think I'm doing down here? Do you think I enjoy breathing this air?' The second occurrence is observable later when Da Costa is lying on the bed in the medical bay after his radiation poisoning. Here, when Max's boss attempts to explain

what happened to his employee, Carlyle interrupts him and exclaims 'don't breathe on me!' The flippant nature of Carlyle's attitude towards the Earth citizens and his general disdain for its polluted environment represents evidence of *Elysium*'s disavowal of high-level corporatism when one considers that Carlyle's actions as founder and CEO of this mega-corporation make him at the very least, partially responsible for the polluted state of Los Angeles.

Furthermore, because of Earth's degraded landscape, the rest of the planet's population has been deprived of a natural environment. This is illustrated well at the start of the film as the young Max and Frey look through a book of animals and Frey communicates that the likes of the elephant and the lion are now extinct. In this case, *Elysium* points the finger of responsibility squarely at large corporations for the deteriorating state of the environment on Earth.

Upon consideration of 4.2 and 4.3, it can be suggested that *Elysium* goes some way to criticise the impact that large corporations and neoliberal governments have on the world's population and also the natural environment. In the view of this study, the life and experiences of Max Da Costa are central to the manner in which this message is presented to the audience. In this framework it is important to look now in more depth at the character to determine to what extent he is successful in executing *Elysium*'s apparent anti-neoliberal objective.

#### ***4.4 Max Da Costa and Neoliberal Continuities?***

Mirrlees and Pedersen write that '*Elysium* has been criticised as politically problematic for...its perpetuation of Hollywood's "white saviour" narrative' (2016: 317), with Peck also quite rightly noting that, despite Los Angeles 2154 being depicted as largely Latinised, 'Max is one of few citizens on Earth that are phenotypically white' (2014: 18). In fact, from what we see in the film, Da Costa appears to be the only white resident of this future dystopian Los Angeles.

Mirrlees and Pedersen follow on to claim that, despite discernible references towards the white saviour trope in *Elysium*, the film generally breaks with elements traditionally observed in this colonial construct:

The critique of *Elysium* as a standardised 'white saviour narrative' is important, but there is a much more nuanced and redemptive reading available which cuts against the ideological grain of this trope. The board of directors of Armadyne, for example, are represented as a white woman, an aging black man, and an Asian, and together, these figures perhaps symbolise an emergent 'trans-national capitalist class' of owners who are not united by race, but rather, by their class interest in making shareholders happy and optimising their own returns (2016: 317-8f.).

In this extract, Mirrlees and Pedersen argue that *Elysium* deals more with a class conflict than an ethnic struggle; and in addition to recurring images of the disadvantaged population of LA, the depiction of the multicultural Armadyne board as representative of a 'trans-national capitalist class' constructs the appearance of a dystopian society mixed in ethnic origin regardless of demography.

However, in this regard, this study would be more inclined to follow more closely Metz's conclusion that, as far as the film is concerned, 'people of colour are relegated to the margins of the storyline...allowing protagonist Da Costa to assume the role of great white hope' (2013: n.p.). Taking into account characters on both sides, while there is evidence for multiculturalism on *Elysium*, there is a complete lack of it on the side of the marginalised. This means that although class conflict remains at the fore of *Elysium*'s narrative, the racial aspect to the story cannot be ignored.

For example, lead actor Matt Damon takes the role of a Latino (evident in his name – Max Da Costa), and apart from him there are no other non-Latino actors taking the part of

characters in the story. Because of this, Damon's whiteness can also be suggested to ensure that the audience coordinates a point of reference with the character from a typical Hollywood (and perhaps traditional colonial) storytelling perspective. A comparison can also be drawn between Da Costa and *Avatar*'s Sully in that the protagonist appears to be afforded a special sense of destiny, a recurring motif central to colonial discourse. This is disseminated in the very first scene of the film in which the younger Max (Maxwell Perry Cotton) is told by a Sister at the orphanage: 'I know you are special. You will do something very important one day. Something you were born for.'

Regarding this, Yorulmaz asserts that Max is constructed within a religious context:

Max is raised by a Catholic nun and we know nothing about his parents. The nun symbolically serves as his mother and she is, we presume, a virgin. Second, Max's mother, the nun, makes a prediction...third, when Max is fighting to save all of humanity (2014: 2).

While Yorulmaz has an acceptable argument with regard to *Elysium*'s religious underpin, colonial patterns override this theme on the whole. For example, like Sully again, Da Costa aligns quite readily with Said's 'novelistic hero' (1994) paradigm. In addition to the nun's prophecy – which alludes to superior abilities in Max, one particular exchange with childhood friend and partner in crime Julio (Diego Luna) supports the white saviour argument also.

In the scene in question, Julio attempts to persuade Max into assisting him break into a house somewhere in the Hollywood Hills, a part of LA that, although never shown, obviously must have retained some level of affluence despite the fact that most of Earth's wealthiest residents have moved to Elysium. Da Costa immediately refuses Julio's offer on account of him 'going straight', in response to this however his buddy retorts: 'what happened to you man? You used to be a legend!' It can be claimed that this exclamation from Julio can be inferred to

illustrate a certain capability in Da Costa. To expand on this, one may assert that even as a small-time crook, he was able to demonstrate exceptional problem solving skills and intelligence in a manner far superior to his fellow Latino criminals. The fact that the (symbolically) white protagonist is able to 'go straight' and the other Latino characters are not, would indicate a continuity with colonial discourse *vis-à-vis* the dichotomy of the stagnant Other versus the enterprising Self (See Blaut 1993: 1).

Furthermore, the general portrayal of the slum-dwelling Latinos in *Elysium* and the lack of urgency they display in wanting to turnaround their miserable situation – in contrast to Da Costa – can also be suggested support this argument in that it reinforces long-held stereotypes of the Other as an unchanging, 'stagnant' entity. On the other hand, Da Costa's display of determined individualism in rejecting his apparent preordained life of crime in favour of 'honest' work in the Armadyne factory, further justifies this and would align with Peck's claim that *Elysium* disseminates a 'loose representation of the American Dream' (2014: 17) in that Da Costa is attempting to climb an existential 'social ladder'.

However, Da Costa is bestowed a moment of destiny when he is inadvertently locked within a chamber at the Armadyne factory and subjected to a fatal dose of radiation. From here, Da Costa's impending death and loss of his job at the factory indicates the beginning of an 'adventure' typical to Said's novelistic hero paradigm. From this point onwards, Carlton states quite rightly that 'the dirty work of changing the world is best left to the white man with rebel backup' (2013: 42).

In this context, one may claim that this assistance is provided to Da Costa by his ex-criminal employer Spider, who entrusts the protagonist with one last job that will 'earn his ticket up there'. To do this Da Costa must apprehend an Elysian billionaire and download information on bank accounts, access codes and other important data from their brain. The target of this particular heist is John Carlyle who, unbeknown to Spider and Max, is colluding

with Defence Secretary Delacourt to overthrow the Elysian government. To initiate this the Armadyne CEO has the entire system reboot program temporarily uploaded to his brain.

As his health is failing, Spider equips Da Costa with a hydraulically powered exoskeleton that will temporarily provide him with the mobility that he will need to complete his mission – the suit additionally gives him superior strength. This is particularly interesting in that the super-strength that the suit allows Da Costa to overcome his own 'post-political impotency' (Cremin 2011: 75) make a tangible difference to the social and economic circumstances that have defined his life. In this sense, one may identify this as another potential criticism of a contemporary US politics restrained by a commitment to neoliberal policy.

Regardless, at the climax to *Elysium*, the protagonist comes to realise that he must sacrifice himself for the good of the population of Earth – fulfilling a quintessential element of Hollywood storytelling convention in the usual fashion. In this way typical patterns of US individualism are detectable in that, after ruthlessly (to the point of committing crimes) pursuing his own agenda in trying to get to Elysium, the scale of his sacrifice veils a selfish individualist objective that the protagonist has been following since his childhood (often at the expense of those around him) of trying to gain citizenship of Elysium. The situation closely resembles that of *District 9*'s Wikus, who commits an act of sympathetic kindness on behalf of the alien Other only when he has resigned himself to his own impending Otherness.

Blomkamp presents the fact rather ironically that the one man who wishes more than anyone to gain entry to Elysium is actually the one to grant this privilege to the 99% of the population who are prohibited from access. Though commentators might point to Da Costa's altruism as an example of the innate empathy fundamental to human nature, this study claims instead that it illustrates a continuity with individualist tendencies in that Max only commits this act after his own egotistical intentions have been exhausted.

Regardless, in the eyes of the audience (who much like with *District 9*'s Wikus are encouraged to disregard Da Costa's history of selfish actions after observing this gesture of self-sacrifice), the protagonist has finally given his life meaning and fulfilled the prophecy of the Sister at the orphanage who envisioned, rather predictably, that he would do 'something special' with his life.

In an interview with *The Telegraph* newspaper in 2013, director Blomkamp added that his inspiration for the Los Angeles 2154 backdrop to the movie came from an incident that he personally experienced during a visit to the Mexican border town of Tijuana. The extract is worth quoting in full considering the insight that it lends to this chapter's argument:

We were walking down the main drag drinking beer, which apparently you're not allowed to do, these *Federales* pulled up, slammed me on the hood, took my passport and put us both in the back of the squad car and began driving out of the city. We both started pushing money through the gate in front of us separating the front and back seats and when we ran out of money they stopped and left us on the side of the road. It took us about three hours to walk back and that was really the genesis of *Elysium* because I could see floodlights from the US border and there were Black Hawk helicopters flying up and down and we were in this poverty stricken area with fires and feral dogs and it was the most insane feeling I've ever had in my life (Hiscock 2013: n.p.).

Reading the quote, one can certainly see where Blomkamp drew inspiration for the scene early in the film where Da Costa is aggressively manhandled by the robot policeman as he waits in line for a bus. Moreover, the general composition of future LA presented at the beginning of the film also comes to mind. However, despite Blomkamp's apparent genuine concern for issues of wealth inequality and disparity in living standards as highlighted in the

interview with Hiscock,<sup>111</sup> there are a number of factors and scenes observable in *Elysium* (in addition to the portrayal of Da Costa) that appear to re-establish key patterns central to neoliberal and (neo)colonial power structures.

Carlton's description of the final fight scene as 'a fist fight between two white men' (2013: 42) can be said to expose a substantial patriarchal and masculinist element to *Elysium*. What makes the scene of particular significance is that it takes place in the base's computer core, a location that, with its complex network of pipes and ventilation shafts, can be said to be visually representative of a human brain, with the addition of cherry blossom trees and their furcate branches also significant in that they can be said to be evocative of neurons (see figure 4.4.1). The pink colour of the cherry blossom petals also feminises the habitat's core – a component



**Figure 4.4.1:** Da Costa and Kruger fighting in the Elysium core.

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<sup>111</sup> Of issues caused by inequality, Blomkamp informs Hiscock: 'I don't know if it's because I grew up in South Africa, and whether it would be the same if I'd just grown up in Vancouver, but these topics just won't leave my mind' (ibid.).



of the scene that is further accentuated by the darker 'masculine' colours worn by Da Costa and the psychotically misogynistic Kruger. Moreover the fact that both characters are also wearing metal exo-suits further highlights their 'manliness' (see Mazurski 2015).

Taking place deep inside the habitat, the location of this violent battle between the film's two prominent alpha-male characters each vying for ownership of a desirable feminised 'prize' *vis-à-vis* Elysium, can be linked to Shohat's argument on female gendering of the Other in Hollywood film as a manifestation of the 'masculinist desire to master a new land' (1997: 27): an element inexorably linked to colonial discourse. Overall, the scene can be said to highlight a continuity with portrayals of the New World as feminine, as recorded in 16th century chronicles and the European paintings of Stradanus.

Colonial discourse is further evident when Da Costa defeats Kruger for complete territorial 'mastery' of the habitat. Here immediately after the victory, the protagonist confirms his claim by plugging himself into the main core of Elysium via a wire link. Building upon the proposal regarding the feminised nature of the location for the final fight scene, it can be suggested that the subsequent actions of the newly-victorious Da Costa in connecting to the computer mainframe and 'unloading' the data into Elysium's core program is somewhat sexually suggestive and further upholds the argument that the fight between Kruger and Max can be interpreted as one of patriarchal ownership linked to colonial discourse.<sup>112</sup>

Exploring other elements of *Elysium* that may reconstruct aspects of colonial discourse, it becomes clear that the film main female lead Frey (Alice Braga) reinforces gender and

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<sup>112</sup> Similar imagery is observable in *Avatar* and the Na'vi's use of their long ponytails to 'connect' with each other and the various species around them on Pandora. The sexual symbolism of the bonding act is communicated early on in the film when Grace sees protagonist Sully looking curiously at the burgeoning tendons emanating from the tip of his ponytail and exclaims: 'don't play with that or you'll go blind!' Throughout the course of the film, Sully repeatedly 'bonds' firstly with the animals of Pandora, with Neytiri and finally, most symbolically of all, with the moon's deity Ewha. Each act of connection arguably conveys the same correlation with regard to desires of patriarchal ownership of territory inherent to colonial discourse. In *Avatar*, it can be argued that the final bonding with Ewha guarantees Sully control of the whole of colonial space – affirming the colonialist desire of owning a feminised land.

cultural binaries and hierarchies. In discussion of the other two prominent female characters, Carlton makes a rather trenchant remark by claiming that they 'are relegated to stereotypical and marginal roles: Delacourt is the power-hungry ice queen, Frey is Da Costa's love interest who is in constant need of rescuing and her sick daughter is just adorably cute' (2013: 42). Mirrlees and Pedersen also present a similar argument:

*Elysium's* privileging of Spider and Max (two heterosexual men) as working class heroes is certainly problematic with regard to gender politics, as women and trans-sexual, gay and lesbian people do not really play a role in the revolution. This film depicts strong men plotting and struggling, sometimes to save weak women, old and young (2016: 318).

Once again, as with the case of Neytiri in *Avatar*, commentators can point to specific aspects of their representation that could be argued to suggest *Elysium* rejects traditional sexist depictions of gender. For example, Delacourt for a short time governs Elysium, and also in her role as secretary, exerts decisions over life and death on a daily basis. Frey is a nurse who somehow, despite growing up in the midst of paralysed economic and social infrastructure on Earth, has managed to complete her education and medical training.<sup>113</sup> Alice Braga has herself commented that she took the role on account of Frey being a 'strong Latin female who is independent and strong' (*Celebnnmusic247* 2013: n.p.). In this regard, Frey's portrayal is relatively progressive in comparison to other older, more explicitly sexist Hollywood films in which prominent female characters are either depicted in sexually objectified roles or positioned as stereotypically inferior to the male lead.<sup>114</sup> However, a prominent example to counter Braga's claim presents itself in the scene when Frey is about to be sexually assaulted by Kruger's right-hand man Crowe (Josh Blacker).

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<sup>113</sup> Such a representation of female independent self-confidence can also be seen in Scott's *G.I. Jane* (1997) and La Marre's *Gang of Roses* (2003).

<sup>114</sup> See Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984).

This moment can be linked to colonial discourse in that the construct of the Other often relies on the assumption of him or her as an irrational figure led by instinctual desires in comparison with a rational, civilised Self (Hall 1986: 215). This is emphasized in this case by the fact that Crowe implies quite heavily that he will rape Frey before he kills her. After Da Costa arrives at the last moment to kill Crowe and subsequently Drake, both a gender hierarchy and patriarchal gaze to scene can be detected. Upon entering the cell to comfort Frey; the high angle shot employed here by Blomkamp when Da Costa speaks versus the low angle used from Frey's perspective evokes long-held notions of the female in fiction as a helpless figure who needs to be rescued by a valiant masculine male lead. In this context, this study would concur with the assertion of Carlton and maintain that, contrary to being ostensibly portrayed as a progressive female, Frey assumes a subordinate, stereotypically feminine role in her relationship with Da Costa, and confirms a continuity with colonial discourse that is present to many contemporary Hollywood film storylines.<sup>115</sup>

#### **4.5 Concluding Remarks**

To a large extent, *Elysium* outwardly criticises present-day, actual resource-hungry corporations by presenting audiences with a scenario in which the consumptionist, fossil fuel-exhausting agenda of multinationals has worn away the economic and social fabric of a fictional twenty-second century society to the point where Earth has no apparent infrastructure, social mobility or even clean air to breathe.

The ruthless racism of Defence Secretary Delacourt also embodies the dismissive attitude of contemporary media portrayals of neoliberal elites in the current epoch. The character's depiction certainly prophetically echoes the inflammatory language and behaviour of the US

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<sup>115</sup> See Trevorrow's *Jurassic World* (2015) and Weitz's *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (2009) for good examples of Hollywood's continuing sexist portrayal of lead female characters.

right on immigration (see Ortiz 2016). Along with Kruger, the sleeper agent employed to do the 'dirty work' of keeping immigrants out of *Elysium* on her behalf, she can be suggested to provide another filmic example of a so-called 'hate figure', whose role it is to absorb the hostile criticisms of the audience with regard to issues of social and economic injustice.

Taking into account the previously discussed example of the *Al Jazeera* (2014) documentary on the deportation of Latinos from the US, and the actions of former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, this investigation puts forward that a link can be made between the tyrannical actions of Delacourt and the rhetoric of far-right politicians concerning immigration. In creating this association, the viewer is thus distanced from the inhumane actions of *Elysium*'s neoliberal elite.

All this links up to the fact that unpleasant acts of stringent immigration control like the ones seen in *Elysium* are not confined to Hollywood fiction; on the contrary they can be quite readily observed within actual mainstream twenty-first century politics. The support that Tony Abbott and other governments around the world are currently receiving from both centre-right media and the majority of the voting public to implement these kinds of measures without recrimination actually highlights the role that the on screen Other plays in stabilising societal ambivalence towards the actual reality of the immigrant Other as a threat to white identity and racial superiority. The animosity directed towards Delacourt et al in *Elysium* can be said to work towards subverting liberal attitudes on immigration, instead drawing attention to a tacit acknowledgment of the need for segregative measures to be employed to exclude the immigrant Other.<sup>116</sup>

Once again here, *Elysium*'s allegory of US immigration and concerns about America's healthcare system initially point toward a legitimate criticism of neoliberalism and capitalism

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<sup>116</sup> As highlighted in the shift to the right amongst voters in the US and Europe since the economic crisis (see Ramalingam 2014).

in general, however the closing scene in which the reprogrammed robot security guards arrive on Earth to distribute medical care to the planet's residents only confirms a discursive underpin that stabilises current US neoliberal policy as it does not offer a real solution. To explain, as the audience indulge in the admirable humanitarianism of Da Costa sacrificing himself for the good of mankind at the climax of the film, one may observe that the medibots actually journey to simply deliver the medical care rather than transporting those on Earth back to Elysium so that they may live a better life. Žižek articulates a justification for this kind of outcome summarises this scenario well:

After righteously rejecting populist racism as unreasonable and unacceptable given our democratic standards, [politicians] endorse reasonably racist protective measures in the national interest (2009: 48).

This rationale is undoubtedly represented here in that the audience are in effect also forced to acknowledge that the 'reasonably racist' protective measures employed by Delacourt prior to her death are necessary to maintain a certain exclusivity inherent to a particular form of identity. Despite this, it is implied through this grand act of altruism that the habitat that Spider has gained control of stands to develop into a new Elysium: the actual utopia it was always supposed to be; a place that – unlike its stewardship under Delacourt et al – is welcoming to immigrants, liberal in its law-making and generous in sharing its advanced medical technology with those that need it. That fantasy is one that is allowed flourish in the imagination as the ending credits begin.

However, if a metaphorical scenario could be entertained in which the *Elysium* story would be permitted to continue on after the 'end' of the actual film, after a few weeks, perhaps only days later, it can be put forward that a disturbing situation would reveal itself: once news of the reboot program's success reached Earth, the habitat would almost certainly become

quickly overwhelmed with tens – perhaps hundreds of millions – of desperate individuals determined to gain access to the base. This surge in population would almost certainly ruin the habitat's pristine environment and its exclusivity very rapidly. Hence the film's ending conclusion conceals the fact that *Elysium* cannot deliver on the utopian promises that the film has attempted to convey throughout the narrative.

It can be asserted here that the embedded hierarchical nature of neoliberalism is confirmed in that the audience are coerced to accept that there is not enough space for the Latino population of Earth to relocate to Elysium. Indeed, an overarching obstacle to mass immigration remains: the super-rich original inhabitants of the base have a legitimate claim to remain on the base as justified through right of ownership – a fundamental component of capitalism.

In articulating the public's acceptance of scenarios like the one presented in *Elysium*, this study would bring attention to Cremin's discussion of Marcuse's work: 'there are two forms of [administrative] tolerance: passive toleration of entrenched and established ideas whatever their social effects, and active official tolerance granted to a spectrum of parties and movements' (2011: 76). The quote articulates the faux-liberalism at work in *Elysium* well: in saving the underprivileged Latino Other, the Self retains an imagined moral high ground in a neoliberal society that has misplaced its moral compass.

As we see, it turns out that all along the most acceptable outcome that Earth's long-suffering inhabitants could hope for was an improvement in the quality of their health, concerns regarding rampant overpopulation, chronic mass unemployment and most importantly, the question of who has the right to live on Elysium and who does not, remain unanswered. One may argue here that those are complications that ultimately do not need to be addressed when reflecting upon *Elysium*'s final scene, which disseminates a clear finality to the narrative

through slow motion shots of Earth's multi-ethnic citizens running joyously towards the robo-medics over an exultant musical score.

Prudham puts forward the idea that corporate-induced environmental degradation in film is often presented as a 'drama which must be performed' (2009: 1596), writing that elites regularly shift the blame for environmental damage from the expansionism and consumptionism inherent to the neoliberal rationale toward 'corrupt practices' and/or particular individual agents. *Elysium* can be suggested to disseminate this paradigm in the moment that Da Costa defeats Kruger and Spider initiates the reboot programme. By seizing control of Elysium, they escape the miserable situation on Earth and gain access to the base's pristine, unpolluted landscape.

However, the fate of the global population is left to Spider, with questions concerning the character's intentions as a people smuggler and crime lord remaining ultimately unanswered. In this way it may be more appropriate to suggest that Spider's criminal background is overlooked completely as he is instead presented as a champion of liberation for Earth's impoverished underclass in *Elysium*'s closing scene. In the context of the 'inherently good Earth citizen' versus an 'essentially immoral Elysian' binary that the film disseminates, the role of a 'native Earthling' designates the character as a trusted personification for social change as he is explicitly not one of those high-level propagators of the current exploitative model like Delacourt or Carlyle.

In how far this correlates with the idea of Cremin's left-liberalism (2011) for instance is debatable here, however the fact that it is a criminal character who largely achieves the legitimate social change that society appears to desire demonstrates a manifestation of scepticism with the static circumstances of contemporary neoliberal politics. Moreover it points to a change in the discourse with regards to the manner in which the superiority of the neoliberal model is disseminated in Hollywood today.

For example, despite Spider being entrusted with introducing the new social order on the base, it is white male lead Da Costa who, armed with an exo-suit that greatly increases his strength, does the 'leg work' of taking down the antagonist Elysian government and their foot soldiers. In this way, *Elysium* inadvertently reconstructs a number of aspects of colonial discourse by regressing into stereotypical binary depictions of the superior Self/inferior Other dichotomy. This supports the claims of Hardt and Negri (2000), Weaver-Hightower (2006, 2007) and Mignolo (2011) that colonial discourse is part of contemporary neoliberal identity.

Protagonist Da Costa's victory over Kruger in the final battle deep within the base's core can be argued to fulfil the colonial desire of becoming a saviour/liberator to the Other as well as conferring upon Self, privileged ownership of the Other's territory. Again, as with Sully in *Avatar* whose fate is designated by the 'sacred' wood sprites, who land on him when he meets Neytiri for the first time, it appears that the paradigm of the white Western male as the saviour to the Other (see Metz 2013) is critical to the construct of neoliberal identity in the films analysed to this point in this study. In this case, through Da Costa, the audience is able to engage the fantasy of saving the Other from corporate capitalism while simultaneously confirming his or her superiority over them in an act of colonial domination. The activation of the reboot program, presented as the beginning of a radical alteration of the societal relationship structure between the citizens of Earth and Elysium, in fact merely reinforces the hierarchical nature of neoliberalism.

This investigation rejects the standpoints of Hampton (2014), Carlton (2013) and Peck (2014) and concludes that Blomkamp ultimately fails to create a genuinely convincing case against neoliberalism in *Elysium*. Despite attempts to raise concerns about the effect of neoliberal policy on healthcare and economics, the film supports the idea that mainstream Hollywood filmmaking convention often justifies neoliberal ideals (Matthews 2007, Cornea 2007, Rieder 2008, 2011, Geraghty 2009).



Blomkamp himself has communicated his frustrations with regard to Hollywood's rigid filmmaking tendencies, stating in interview with *io9*'s Wilkins that 'he'll keep making films on the relative cheap, because it's the only way to make science fiction movies with creative freedom' (2010: n.p.). Moreover, taking into account the director's recurring attempts to address real social and economic issues, discernible in *District 9* and 2015's *Chappie*, it can be presumed that *Elysium*'s endorsement of neoliberal identity emanates not from the conscious intentions of the director himself, but rather the deep-rooted mentalities intrinsic to neoliberalism that have come to heavily influence the rigid paradigms of Hollywood film storytelling.

In this context, this investigation adds a new paradigm of research to *Elysium* in being the first to critique the potential and limits to the film's neoliberal tendencies. The feature can be said to aspire to present itself as one that draws attention to systemic deficiencies in the faltering neoliberal model, ultimately the importance of Hollywood's role as a mechanism for the dissemination of neoliberal ideals ensures that *Elysium* unfortunately remains another example of a filmic distraction for those who might desire a fairer society.

## 5. *The Wachowskis' and Tykwer's Cloud Atlas*

### 5.1 *Preliminary Remarks*

Adapted from British author David Mitchell's 2004 best-selling novel of the same name, *Cloud Atlas* is a collaborative effort from Lana and Andy (now Lilly) Wachowski – the directors of *The Matrix* franchise, and German filmmaker Tom Tykwer, who is internationally known as the director and writer of the critically acclaimed thriller *Run Lola Run* (1998). The film has been selected for in-depth analysis because of its significant impact as a multi-million-dollar grossing feature and the three directors' attempts to narrate the story against the backdrop of the struggle for liberal values of freedom and equality of sexuality, race and class.

In an era in which self-assurance in the superiority of neoliberalism has become a major concern for elites in the United States (among other countries), such liberal predilections in contemporary cinema can, on occasion, purposely or inadvertently disseminate a preference toward particular identities and/or cultural hierarchies – and to what extent *Cloud Atlas* stabilises or destabilises neoliberal patterns will be explored here. This chapter primarily seeks to determine: 1) to what extent attacks on neoliberal practices can be discerned in the film's depiction of Energy conglomerate 'Swannekke' and Neo Seoul's twenty-second century Unanimity 'corpocracy', 2) investigate in how far *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative can be labelled as liberal within a neoliberal milieu, and 3) explore the degree to which colonial hierarchies exist in the film.

The plot of *Cloud Atlas* encompasses six central storylines that take place over the course of 500 years.<sup>117</sup> With each narrative interweaving with the other five, the story is

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<sup>117</sup> One major difference between Mitchell's novel and film version is the inclusion of a seventh plot set on a distant planet that chronologically follows on from the Hawaii, 2321 section of the film. This extra story appears to have been included merely to assist the audience in comprehending the non-linear nature of the narrative and does not impact the overall plot in any significant way.

essentially one of reincarnation as well as – according to *Cloud Atlas*'s official synopsis – a film that 'explores how the actions of individual lives impact one another in the past, present and future' (*Cloud Atlas Official* 2012). After a number of high-profile Hollywood studios turned the project down, funding for *Cloud Atlas* ultimately came from a number of German sources: the Federal Film Fund (DFFF), and a subsidiary of the German government, the *Film und Medien Stiftung NRW* (von Jana 2012: n.p.).<sup>118</sup>

Officially an independent picture, *Cloud Atlas* cannot be classified as a Hollywood feature *per se*, however what can be certain from the outset is that the film contains a number of familiar conceptual, stylistic and cultural reference points for audiences that provide the opportunity for an analysis in the context of this thesis. Hence, *Cloud Atlas* delivers a worthwhile opportunity observe in how far neoliberal norms exist outside the domain of Hollywood sci-fi cinema.

Despite initial production problems, *Cloud Atlas* was completed successfully and took \$130 million at the box office against a \$102 million budget (*Box Office Mojo* 2015c) thanks to an intensive marketing campaign from Warner Bros. The film polarised critics however, who while applauding the three directors for undertaking such an ambitious project (Mintzer 2012, Ansen 2012, Hemon 2012), were disapproving of its 171 minute running time and the way in which the stories were relayed to the viewer in a nonlinear manner as opposed to the chronological sequence employed in Mitchell's original book (Collin 2012, Kane 2013).

Away from mainstream media, despite a modest canon of scholarly criticisms of the novel (Economides 2009, Edwards 2011, Bayer 2015), commentaries on the film version of *Cloud Atlas* are relatively limited. Despite this there are however a few interesting discussions

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<sup>118</sup> *Cloud Atlas* encountered countless problems during the production phase, with the project almost abandoned altogether several times because the Wachowskis and Tykwer struggled to secure a financial backer. However, once the German benefactors stepped in, *Cloud Atlas* became the most expensive independent production of all time.

that address themes of colonial discourse (Ng 2015), the film's socio-cultural context (Baccolini 2016), and questions of gender identity (Estrada 2014, Ferguson 2015) that may assist in formulating the argument of this chapter later on. Estrada for example debates the 'social vision' of director Lana Wachowski in *Cloud Atlas vis-à-vis* her own gender transition in the early 2000s,<sup>119</sup> writing that her advocacy for the cause and the psychological issues she faced as a teenager with regard to gender confusion are detectable in the fact that a number of *Cloud Atlas*'s characters find themselves born as both male and female throughout the story's 500-year time line. Estrada elaborates: 'through their parallel editing of the racially diverse actors and actresses who reincarnate across the six eras, the Wachowskis intimate that all people are ultimately transgender and transracial actors in a universal soul struggle for freedom' (ibid.: 2). Moreover, this theme could be linked to Cornea's comments on the 'fragmentation of traditional forms of subjectivity' (2007: 188) in cinema from the 1990s onwards, as well as developments in Hollywood representations of US (neoliberal) masculinity.

Baccolini writes that *Cloud Atlas* employs its apocalyptic trope to draw attention to these issues, in addition to constructing 'a critique of political, economic and social greed against all living forms on the planet' (2016: 74), with the Neo Seoul and Hawaii dystopian stories in particular illustrating this. Mcateer's (2012) discussion focuses upon the philosophical and ideological nature of the narrative with a comparison of the film to Ayn Rand's famous book *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). The author draws attention to the way in which *Atlas Shrugged*'s apocalyptic ending comes about as the result of a government that 'won't leave self-made businessmen alone to pursue profit in their own way' (ibid.: n.p), Mcateer sees the opposite message in *Cloud Atlas*: '[here the] problem is that the government has left businesses alone,

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<sup>119</sup> At the time of the publication of Estrada's article, Lily Wachowski had not yet completed her own gender transition.

and their endless pursuit of profit has cannibalised itself' (ibid.). Martin's essay follows a similar line of augmentation and concludes:

[The narrative] criticises capitalist systems for their drive to increase labour, profit and consumption at a human cost. It promotes critical microtopias that incite the possibility of a radically changeable world in which forces of violence and predation do not necessarily exceed humanist, liberal values of compassion (2013: 27).

Martin's observation of 'microtopias' that have the ability to alter the current world order indicates the possibility of a concept related to that of which this thesis is exploring: i.e. a loss of confidence in the neoliberal model. In that vein, this investigation aims to contribute to research on *Cloud Atlas*'s potential and limits as a feature that criticises neoliberal ideals with a focus upon the story's key characters and themes.

This chapter will begin with an exploration of the film's representation of neoliberalism and its mechanisms of power (5.2) *vis-à-vis* the depiction of energy company boss Lloyd Hooks (Hugh Grant) and the uber-capitalist corporate entity Unanimity – government of dystopian Neo Seoul in 2144. Next, 5.3 will analyse the scene in which Hae-joo Chang (portrayed by British actor Jim Sturgess) attacks and kills a group of Unanimity guards in order to deduce how far this moment should be regarded as a symbolic attack on neoliberal conservatism. After examining discontinuities with established neoliberal norms, 5.4 will explore colonial continuities in *Cloud Atlas* by analysing the relationship between slave Autua (David Gyasi) and American lawyer Adam Ewing (also played by Jim Sturgess) – as well as consider the San Francisco, 1849 story in the context of colonial representations of the New World.

## **5.2 A Liberal World in Cloud Atlas?**

Constant references to corporate corruption and institutionalised sexism in the San Francisco story – in addition to allegories of environmental disaster and worker exploitation in the Neo Seoul plot, demonstrate a propensity for *Cloud Atlas*'s directors to condemn excess greed and corruption in contemporary big business. To investigate this further, it is useful to bring in Belton's analysis of the Western genre, in which the author claims that central characters have a formulaic tendency to 'become corrupted by forces of corporate capitalism – i.e. railroads, banks, mining interests' (2005: 264).<sup>120</sup> In twenty-first century cinema, it might seem self-evident to point out that this dynamic is not limited to Westerns: on the contrary it appears to have been incorporated into the science fiction genre as the popularity of the Western itself has declined.

*Avatar* could certainly be presented as an excellent example of this in contemporary science fiction, with mining interests very much pivotal to the story. In wider film, Soderbergh's *Erin Brockovich* (2000) portrays the eponymous protagonist (Julia Roberts) fighting against the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) in small town California on the subject of an environmental cover-up, and in Trevorrow's *Jurassic World* (2015) also alludes to the corruption of the park's geneticists by the corporate military, whose interest lies chiefly in the manipulation of the dinosaurs for biological weapons purposes.

In *Cloud Atlas*'s San Francisco story, journalist Luisa Rey (Halle Berry)<sup>121</sup> is informed by aged nuclear physicist Rufus Sixsmith (James D'Arcy) of a faulty nuclear reactor at a power plant owned by large energy corporation Swanekke. Sixsmith informs her of a shady corporate scheme to intentionally allow the reactor to go into meltdown so that the plant's management (who secretly represent an oil lobby) can win the public over to the idea of petroleum-based energy.

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<sup>120</sup> See Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* as a good example (2007).

<sup>121</sup> Great granddaughter of Moriori slave Autua from the nineteenth century Pacific Islands story.

The plan to allow such a large scale nuclear disaster to occur – symbolic at the time of the film's release just a few years after the images of the damaging effects of the Deepwater Horizon disaster were broadcast globally – can be suggested to illustrate a denunciation of the intentions of high-level corporatism in *Cloud Atlas*. Swanekke CEO Lloyd Hooks embodies this construct of the 'immoral' corporate figure in a manner comparable to media portrayals of high-level banking and government officials in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. In the same way, Hooks may also be suggested to compare with *Avatar*'s Quaritch, *District 9*'s Piet Smit and *Elysium*'s Delacourt as a characterised manifestation of audience frustration with neoliberal elites. Unlike these characters however – whose antagonistic qualities are supplemented with an embedded racial prejudice, Hooks holds a number of views on female equality and the environmentalist movement that do not correspond with contemporary accepted norms.

Evidence for this claim can be discerned in the scene where he meets Rey for the first time, where upon introduction he comments: 'I have to say if all lady journalists look like you, I might start to take this, uh... women's lib thing more seriously'. Later, in a televised press conference on the future of energy in the United States, his disavowal of the environment is apparent in the line '....some fantasise about wind turbines or pig gas...' which flippantly dismisses renewable energy.

Sporting large sunglasses with slick parted hair and a stylish waistcoat, Hooks is constructed visually to resemble other stereotypical 1970s and 1980s-era corporate bosses like Max Schumacher (William Holden) in Lumet's *Network* (1976) and Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) in Stone's *Wall Street* (1987). There is a possibility that the representation of the Hooks character in this way: a macho authority figure with no tolerance for liberal rights, could be the consequence of directors' Lana and Lilly Wachowski's own personal experiences growing up as individuals with feelings of psychological confusion *vis-à-vis* gender identity. Support for this claim can perhaps be found in a speech by Lana Wachowski given at the Human Rights Campaign

(HRC) Gala Dinner in Portland, Oregon, around the time of *Cloud Atlas*'s release (see Abramovitch 2012). In the address, Wachowski discusses a childhood incident that occurred after she transferred from a public school to a Catholic institution in the third grade; what she says certainly highlights an aversion to traditionalist authority figures:

In public school I played mostly with girls, I have long hair and everyone wears jeans and t-shirts. In Catholic school the girls wear skirts, the boys play pants. I am told I have to cut my hair. I want to play Four Square with the girls but now I'm one of them – I'm one of the boys. Early on I am told to get in line after a morning bell, girls in one line, boys in another. I walk past the girls feeling this strange, powerful gravity of association. Yet some part of me knows I have to keep walking. As soon as I look towards the other line, though, I feel a feeling of differentiation that confuses me. I don't belong there, either. I stop between them. The nun I realise is staring at me, she's shouting at me. I don't know what to do. She grabs me, she's yelling at me. I'm not trying to disobey, I'm just trying to fit in. My silence starts to infuriate her, and she starts to hit me (*Hollywood Reporter* 2012: n.p.).

Although it may be somewhat ambitious to claim that there is a link between Lana Wachowski's traumatic childhood experience with a Catholic nun and the portrayal of Hooks as representative of discriminatory institutional corporatism in the 1970s, *Cloud Atlas* support of liberal values, the assumed countercultural foundations to the LGBT rights movement, and Lana Wachowski's role as an advocate of this – evident in her acceptance of the HRC visibility award, provides enough of a basis on which to investigate further the notion that *Cloud Atlas* is a feature that rejects the masculine conservatism typical of corporate and government leadership.

To explain, Hooks' inclination for an all-male boardroom, dismissal of the environmentalist movement, and his openly sexist comments to reporter Rey work to distance the character from



the film's otherwise progressive agenda.<sup>122</sup> The manner in which the corruption of a large, overwhelmingly white-male, misogynistic corporation is toppled by the black, great granddaughter of a freed slave for one supports *Cloud Atlas*'s strong liberal disposition and also appears to support Cady's (2013) opinion that this demonstrates a strong disavowal of corporate capitalism from the film's directors.

It may help to analyse the Neo Seoul story in more detail to investigate the above claim further. In this particular scenario, we are presented with the sombre outcome of centuries of acquiescence to neoliberal policy: Neo Seoul is controlled by an authoritarian 'corpocracy' and Earth itself is divided into twelve (presumably city) states that are not ruled over by presidents or kings, but by honourable 'Boardmen' and 'Chairmen'. From the narrative composition of the Neo Seoul story, it is straightforward enough for even the most uncritical viewer to deduce that this section of *Cloud Atlas* is exploring the negative potentialities of what may happen if neoliberal capitalism were given unrestrained authority over the world economy (see Mcateer 2012). Incorporating one of *Avatar*'s underlying themes, *Cloud Atlas* appears to lay the blame for this state of affairs in 2144 squarely on neoliberal practices – actively chastising contemporary corporate greed (and wider societal apathy) for ignorant dismissals of warnings concerning system-induced social injustice and global warming.<sup>123</sup>

In Neo Seoul, an authoritarian corporate society has been established at the expense of a socialist democracy despite the optimistic portrayals of liberal rights struggles depicted in the previous stories. Economides contextualises the 2144 global circumstance explained in

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<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, closure to this particular narrative is similar to the one seen in Blomkamp's *District 9* and Jones' *Moon* (2009), where the supposedly untouchable arrogant corporate leaders are publicly exposed as crooks and subsequently humiliated. In this case, the unscrupulous practices of Swanekke are also disclosed by Rey in the shape of Sixsmith's report on the faulty reactor.

<sup>123</sup> Criticism regarding neoliberalism's role in environmental degradation is particularly evident when Union rebel Hae-joo Chang explains to Sonmi-451 (Doona Bae) as she peers out the window at a submerged district of the city: '...that's Old Seoul. If the tides keep rising at their present rate, Neo-Seoul will also be under water in a hundred years.'

Mitchell's book in more detail; although there are a few changes in the film version, the description is sufficient for the argument in this case:

In addition to gross social injustice, the 'corpocracy' also perpetuates environmental destruction, creating 'sacrifice zones' in order to support its unsustainable economic growth. Vast, acid-rain drenched urban slums are the dwelling place of [Neo Seoul] underclass ('Downstrata'), while its surrounding 'Production Zones', areas which supply natural resources and food, are becoming similarly toxic (2009: 620).

The embodiment of collective viewer resentment regarding the way in which the greedy corporate Unanimity government have prioritised capital production over environmental protection and social equality can be assuaged in the moment where an imprisoned Sonmi meets the heartless 'Boardman Mephi' (Hugo Weaving): the only member of the Unanimity 'Upstrata' with a speaking part. In the scene, the Mephi enters Sonmi's cell and begins addressing the captured fabricant. Standing over her in an intimidating way he boasts: 'I find it intriguing to imagine that beneath these perfectly engineered features, there are thoughts that terrify the whole of Unanimity. I'm not afraid of such thoughts, because I do not fear the truth'.

The character's ornery demeanour and comments ensure that the audience is able to identify Mephi's antagonistic qualities, to confirm this however, the Boardman goes on to echo the racist mantra of his nineteenth century incarnation Haskell Moore (also played by Weaving) stating: there's a natural order to this world, fabricant. And the truth is this order must be protected'. In the same moment, Mephi glares intently at Sonmi with all the self-satisfied vindication of a man in a position of authoritative untouchability, however instead of staring down at the floor as one may expect, Sonmi instead slowly raises her eyes to make direct contact with Mephi's, holding his gaze, he is left visibly unsettled and then hastily leaves the room.

The scene stands out as a particularly impressive piece of filmmaking; moreover the emotional intensity that the stare elicits from the viewer's perspective can be suggested to

represent a firm rejection to the arrogance and self-entitlement of high-level power figures. It could also be linked back to Lana Wachowski's experience of being verbally and physically attacked by an authority figure in the shape of a Catholic nun as a student (*Hollywood Reporter* 2012: n.p.), as well as the egotistical behaviour of the likes of Tony Hayward during the Deepwater Horizon disaster (see Wray 2010), a monumental environmental catastrophe that occurred during the film's production. Regardless, through particular characters, themes and filmmaking conventions, the Neo Seoul and San Francisco stories lend support to *Cloud Atlas's* anti-conservative and anti-neoliberal inclination.

In addition to *Cloud Atlas*, the dissemination of racial and gender liberalism is a persistent motif in a number of the Wachowskis' other popular movies. 2015 feature *Jupiter Ascending* lends weight to this suggestion, as does the hugely successful *Matrix* franchise (1999, 2003a, 2003b). Estrada elaborates:

The Wachowskis' previous garnering of support for race, class, and gender critiques [is seen] in the *Matrix* series that featured a multicultural cast, male and female protagonists, and a presence of African-American actors in supportive roles including Laurence Fishburne as Morpheus. The diverse *Matrix* cast successfully fends off the oppressive computer reality that is designed by the white male Architect (Helmut Bakaitis) and defended by the white male Agent Smith (2014: 11).

The characters played by British actor David Gyasi (Autua, Lester Rey et al) provide an interesting point of discussion when one analyses *Cloud Atlas's* own liberal narrative as related to Estrada's comment. The three prominent characters that Gyasi plays are representative of an ambivalent relationship toward institutionalised racism in the United States today. To explain, in the Pacific Islands story the result of Autua's liberation from slavery by American lawyer Adam Ewing is that his soul will go on to inhabit the body of prominent investigative reporter and Korean War veteran Lester Rey. Many centuries later, the same soul embodies Duophysite, leader

of the dark-skinned Prescients: an intelligent, 'civilised' tribe that reside somewhere on Earth in 2321 and still use the advanced technology of the pre-Fall capitalists.

Unlike Donna Bae's, Zhou Xun's and Halle Berry's characters – who are reincarnated into different genders and races – the respectable achievements of this perpetual black 'soul' demonstrates an attempt to ensure that the utopian-liberal narrative remains clear. Primarily, it rightly acknowledges the contribution of African Americans to US history and culture through a depiction of Lester Rey as a soldier on the frontline of a major historical event in the shape of the Vietnam War, and later as an award-winning reporter who exposes black injustice. Duophysis's position as leader of the Prescients constructs the idea that an imagined 'colourblind' liberal paradise might be established once neoliberalism is removed. The decision by the directors to ostensibly designate the Prescients as 'black/dark-skinned' supports this and could be interpreted as a riposte to the white-male dominated, machismo corporate governance of *Cloud Atlas*'s many oppressive institutions like Swannekke and Unanimity.

*Cloud Atlas* demonstrates a good example of Ritzer's idea of 'McDonaldisation' (1997, 1998, 2007) in the miserable situation of Sonmi-451 who, as a genetically engineered 'fabricant' in dystopian Seoul, has only one purpose in life – which is to serve customers for nineteen hours per day in a fast food restaurant known as Papa Song's. Firstly, judging from the red and yellow colour scheme of the establishment's interior, it can be deduced that the Papa Song's itself is implied to be McDonald's (see figure 5.2.1), a brand that, along with Coca-Cola and Nike, epitomises rampant US neoliberalism and 'Americanisation' (Ritzer 1997, 2007). Regardless, the planned rational character of McDonaldisation is well-represented in Sonmi's daily life in the

restaurant, the meticulous schedule of which is recounted to an unnamed Unanimity 'archivist' (James D'Arcy) in the opening scene of the story:<sup>124</sup>



<sup>124</sup> In the context of this uber-neoliberal story and its setting in Asia rather than the US, Kalb writes that in contemporary media discourse there is a tendency to designate 'the West' as an institution in hegemonic decline compared with Asia; that the 'rerouting of capital away from the old [European] core' to the so-called 'Asian Tigers' has also been accompanied by an inevitable 'cultural rerouting' (2013: 264). Indeed, upon reflection of the undoubted economic success stories of Singapore and China (in spite of their antipathy towards the democratic process), some commentators (Erich 2012, Krastev 2012) see the move towards an authoritarian capitalist model similar to the one in the Neo Seoul story as already underway on account of environmental disasters and failed economic policies increasing the financial pressure on social services. Having said that, that this 'rerouting' of both culture and capital away from the (presumed) US centre toward a possible future of Asian socio-economic domination in Western discourse is in fact not represented in the Neo Seoul 2144 story or in *Cloud Atlas* in general. On the contrary, the reduction of the future world governmental system to a small number of territories appears to reinforce the notion of a continuing American-led process of hegemonic domination.

At hour four, each server is awoken by auto-stimulin. From revival, we proceed to the hygiener. After dressing we file into the dinery. At hour five, we man our stations to greet the new day's consumers. For the next nineteen hours we input orders, tray food, vend drinks, up stock condiments, wipe tables, and bin garbage. All done in strict adherence to First Catechism: 'Honor thy consumer.' After the final cleaning, we imbibe one Soapsac, then return to our sleep box.<sup>125</sup>

Sonmi's scenario can also be interpreted as a critique of abuse of labour, especially when we take into account *Cloud Atlas*'s production throughout the backdrop of the 2008 economic crisis and the proceeding Occupy movement. Occupy in particular was an event that focused heavily on the exploitation of society by the elite minority, and appears to be reflected in some way here. In an interview with *A.V. Club*'s Robinson, Lana Wachowski was asked about the way in which *Cloud Atlas* depicts power dynamics:

Power is something artists have been writing about since *The Iliad*. Okay, power is a part of the human experience. You see power dynamics trying to be understood in *The Iliad*, and you see them in [Paul Thomas Anderson's] *The Master* [2012]...and so when we first read David Mitchell's book, I thought it was an unbelievable examination of incredibly varied perspectives, and also the relationship between the responsibilities we have to people we have power over, and the responsibility we have to the people who have power over us. Are we meant to just accept their conventional construct of whatever they imagine the world to be? Or are we obliged in some way to struggle against it? In the reverse, what is the obligation of the person whose life we have power over? Are they obliged to struggle against that conventional relationship (2012: n.p.)?

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<sup>125</sup> The uniformity of Sonmi's appearance with the other servers: identical haircut, clothes and so on, accentuates the lack of individualism and freedom in her life as a worker in a highly rigid, controlled environment.

In addition to Sonmi's description of the unrelenting predictability of her daily life at Papa Song's, the opening montage of the Neo Seoul story is supplemented with images of the protagonist being subjected to sexual and verbal abuse from customers as she goes about her work in the restaurant. Moreover, closely observing the rest of the story in which Sonmi is liberated from Papa Song's and, drawing inspiration from prominent dissident authors like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn,<sup>126</sup> goes on to write and broadcast her 'revelations'<sup>127</sup> to a global audience, would suggest that the directing trio prefers to depict *Cloud Atlas*'s master/slave dynamic as something unfavourable to a liberal social order. This indicates a rejection of the same conservative authoritarianism perhaps exemplified in Lana Wachowski's anecdote concerning her traumatic past experience with the Catholic nun (see *Hollywood Reporter* 2012: n.p.).

In spite of the comments mentioned here and the strong liberal underpin to the *Matrix* trilogy and *Cloud Atlas*, the Wachowskis have often been reluctant to admit that their films have any particular political inclination. For example in the same Robinson interview, Lana also claims 'we don't want to delimit interpretation, and we don't want to say, "We are making *this* to mean *this*.'" What we find is that the most interesting art is open to a spectrum of interpretation' (ibid.). However, in *Cloud Atlas* the main antagonists are clearly depicted negatively as conservative white males who abuse their power.

The next subsection of this investigation will turn to the film's protagonists – specifically resistance fighter and primary protagonist Hae-joo Chang, in order to analyse how *Cloud Atlas* articulate its liberal worldview, and how this can be linked to neoliberal contexts.

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<sup>126</sup> Sonmi at one point quotes Solzhenitsyn: 'you can maintain power over people, as long as you give them something. Rob a man of everything and that man will no longer be in your power'.

<sup>127</sup> Which alerts the public to the horrific conditions of fabricant workers and the fact that they are 'recycled' into soap for other clones to eat.

### **5.3 Hae-joo Chang as a Figure of Anti-neoliberalism?**

The character of Chang takes the 'Hollywood action hero' role in *Cloud Atlas* (Uwire Text 2012: 1). The film's dense plot means however that the directors took upon themselves the difficult task of relying on both subtle and direct prompts to disseminate information about the characters' backstories in what limited screen time they each had. Hence to contextualise Chang is a difficult undertaking because, unlike the character of Sully for example (who's past and personality are outlined in considerable detail to the audience in the first hour or so of *Avatar*), *Cloud Atlas* simply does not have the time to do this. Thus almost nothing is known about Chang's past or what motivated him to become a member of the Union rebel movement.

Notwithstanding, linking this to Chang as the principal figure of resistance against the 'corpocracy', and taking into account the film's anti-conservative stance and the role of Unanimity as symbol of uber-neoliberalism, it is possible to speculate for the sake of argument that as young man raised in Old Seoul,<sup>128</sup> he became so discontented with the materialist and consumptionist dogma of his government that he decided to join the underground rebel movement with the aim of disrupting the established capitalist order.

From the character's limited screen time, it is also possible to observe that Chang fulfils the typical personality criteria of a (Hollywood) film lead protagonist: he is quietly confident, intelligent, and level-headed. These attributes are emphasized to the viewer in the scene in which he walks a narrow platform between skyscrapers with Sonmi while Unanimity soldiers shoot at them and aircrafts hover in close proximity. Amid the chaos, whilst simultaneously returning fire to guards, Chang looks a frightened Sonmi directly in the eye and remaining very calm, states 'I'm right here. I won't let you go'.

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<sup>128</sup> Chang states at one point quite clearly that the Union movement was born in the underprivileged backstreets of Old Seoul.



He also displays exceptional leadership skills as a commander of the Union rebel movement in orchestrating the plan to ensure Sonmi is able to broadcast her 'revelations' to the world at the climax of the story. In this scene, as Sonmi initiates her speech, the protagonist's authority is indicated in the fact that Chang is pictured in front of the other rebels and is larger in size than those behind him. He is moreover the only rebel whose face is actually seen by the audience aside from that of Union leader An-kor Apis (Keith David).

His leadership qualities are further reinforced through the generic phrases he utters at various points in the plot that are supposed to be inspirational. One particular line: 'survival often demands our courage,' encapsulates this. Overall, Chang stands against everything that the Unanimity government propagates, and it is made clear that he is willing to die in order to incite the revolution that will see the downfall of the corpocracy.

The critical question that needs to be answered at this stage is thus: can a distancing technique be discerned with regards to the representation of Chang versus that of Unanimity: an institution symbolic of neoliberalism? To explore this further it is useful to return to Baker's comments on the role of cinema as an 'escape from the things our day-to-day lives do not provide' (2015: n.p.), and situate this notion within the framework of *Cloud Atlas's* overall anti-neoliberal tendencies – in particular the inhumane and exploitative practices of the Neo Seoul government.

In this context, a particular scene in which Chang single-handedly takes on and kills a number of Unanimity police deserves further attention. Not only does it evoke memories of some of the Wachowskis' most popular action scenes from *The Matrix* (1999) and *V for Vendetta* (2006),<sup>129</sup> it demonstrates another possible example of leitmotifs in *District 9* and *Elysium* where the lead protagonists engage in dramatic fist fights that involve single-handedly

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<sup>129</sup> The Wachowskis were attached as producers in this particular case.

taking on both individuals and large groups of antagonists representative of corporate and/or authoritarian government regimes.

In the scene in question, Unanimity police arrive to surround a laundry truck containing Chang and Sonmi; dressed all-black with darkened visors covering their faces, the police officers haul the protagonist from the truck, violently throwing him against the side of the vehicle, and then pointing laser guns to his head. Chang himself is at the same time pretending to be a simple truck driver who does not speak English. In response to the protagonist's ramblings in Korean, one of the officers can be crudely heard to say 'fuckin' migrant monkey talk!' which certainly demonstrates to the viewer that there is an ingrained, institutionalised racism within the Unanimity government (Mephi's aforementioned prejudice concerning the 'hierarchical order to this world' discussed in 5.2 also draws attention to this).<sup>130</sup> The English accent of corpocracy's personnel and the relegation of the city's native tongue (Korean) to a second-class language also reconstructs aspects of European colonialism.

All this amounts to the conveyance of a message that there is an institutional hatred of immigrants (and fabricants) in the city state, which is once more at odds with the multicultural/liberal agenda that the directors promote throughout *Cloud Atlas*. In this way, the moment at the end of the scene in which Chang saves Sonmi from the clutches of Unanimity is significant; once the police discover that Sonmi is hidden in the truck, Chang is forced to reveal that he is a resistance fighter and suddenly attacks the officers. He violently kills each one of them using the kind of martial art skills that viewers of the Wachowskis' films have now become accustomed to: one officer is shot with his own weapon by Chang, another is knocked off a ledge to fall to his death, and a third guard inside a hovercraft is blown up using a magnetic grenade.

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<sup>130</sup> This is also alluded to in an earlier scene where the archivist (James D'Arcy) refers to Korean as 'sub-speak' during his interview with Sonmi. The full line is '...as an officer of Unanimity, I am of course restricted from using sub-speak'.

The following wide point-of-view shot includes a number of interesting elements: the combination of the craft exploding in slow motion, along with a simultaneous increase in contrast – and the zoom in for an extreme close up of Sonmi's astonished face in the shot that immediately follows, works to accentuate a certain heroism in Chang and confirms the protagonist as a symbol of optimism and hope for a world without the cruel ethics and prejudices embodied in the Unanimity corpocracy (see figure 5.3.1).

It is clear through the line uttered to Sonmi: 'I believe you have the power to change this world', that Chang believes that an upheaval of the current world order is necessary, this message corresponds to *Cloud Atlas's* wider humanist message, which largely rejects neoliberal ideals and promotes the need for a more egalitarian and compassionate society. This assertion builds upon Edwards' observation of an 'optimistic, humanistic aesthetic' to *Cloud Atlas* (2011: 175) and would lend further support to the standpoints of Martin (2013) and Baccolini (2016) who believes that the film is anti-neoliberal.



**Figure 5.3.1:** Shot of Chang blowing up the Unanimity ship.

#### **5.4 Colonial Mentalities in Cloud Atlas**

The Pacific Islands and Hawaii sections of the feature warrant in-depth interrogation within a colonial context on account of American protagonist Adam Ewing's relationship with a stowaway slave and the decision to depict the 'Kona' tribe living on post-apocalyptic Hawaii as cannibals. The extent to which these two scenarios reconstruct (or break) with classic colonial dichotomies would give a strong indication as to *Cloud Atlas*'s potential as a feature that demonstrates a change in established portrayals of the Other.

Shohat and Stam discuss the impact that Christopher Columbus' voyages to the Americas – among other Age of Discovery expeditions – have had upon Hollywood filmic depictions of the non-European world: '[the voyages were] crucial...idealised versions of [Columbus'] story have served to initiate generation after generation into the colonial paradigm' (1994: 62). Indeed, romanticised accounts of 'the natives' and landscapes observable in Bartolomé de las Casas' transcript of Columbus' logbook of his journey to the Americas<sup>131</sup> have long been argued by postcolonial scholars to be the beginning of what would later encompass colonial discourse and narratives of Orientalism that remain central to contemporary neoliberal ideas of superiority (Mignolo 2011, Hardt and Negri 2000).

The imaginative artistic illustrations of Columbus' encounter with the native Americans, and those that accompanied the subsequent voyages of Hernán Cortés and de las Casas, many claim (Loomba 1998, Brown and Paquette 2013) have largely been internalised and normalised in the European subconscious as genuine representations of the so-called 'non-European' world.<sup>132</sup> In this context, this study would concur with Burnstein and Studlar's (1997) claim

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<sup>131</sup> As discussed at length by Jara and Spadaccini who state: '[Columbus'] story has become a piece of art in the sense that it has acquired its own truth, a truth that in addition to being self-validating and indisputable, is also ambiguous and contradictory' (1992: 2).

<sup>132</sup> See Ella and Stam (2003), Bernstein and Studlar (1997) and Nadel who describes 'the narrative clichés of Orientalism that comprise a set of loose "realities" reinforced in political speeches, newspaper accounts and TV commercials' (1997: 185).

that these images have also been continually reproduced in Hollywood cinema throughout its own history: with Ludwig's *Caribbean Gold* (1952), Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and Verbinski's *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) providing good examples of films that contain imagery comparable to the 'Age of Discovery' artwork of Giuliano Dati and Caspar Plautius.

In this way, corresponding images of an exoticised non-European space appear evident in *Cloud Atlas*'s Pacific Island story. Set briefly on the Chatham Islands – historically home to the indigenous Moriori people, the plot revolves around an encounter between American lawyer Adam Ewing and stowaway native Autua, portraying their burgeoning friendship aboard a ship sailing to San Francisco. However, before the analysis begins, it is worth focusing upon the islands themselves, which can be suggested to represent another prime example of George Orwell's 'land of adventure' paradigm (see Davidson 2001: 251):<sup>133</sup> a spatial construct proposed by Orwell as essential to the concept of Otherness and of European understanding of the world 'beyond'.

Evidence for this can be found upon introduction to the Pacific Islands story:<sup>134</sup> here an establishing shot sees protagonist Ewing approaching Dr. Henry Goose (Tom Hanks) on a vast, empty beach. A wide crane shot, complete with giant rocky peaks on either side of the frame, accentuates the untouched, pristine environment of the beach to the viewer – as well as the inescapable destiny of Ewing's character. The high shot and the small figure of Ewing versus the expansive natural surroundings creates an atmosphere of so-called 'dangerous empty space' (Ryan and Lenos 2012: 38) – signifying the establishment of something comparable to the 'land of adventure' paradigm.

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<sup>133</sup> See 2.4.

<sup>134</sup> Filming for this section of film and the Hawaii story took place in Mallorca, Spain.

This narrative is underlined by Goose who employs colonial discourse to inform Ewing that the beach 'used to be a cannibal's banqueting hall', providing evidence of his claim in the form of discarded human teeth that he has uncovered from beneath the pebbles. Ng discusses the figure of the cannibal in literature and film, asserting that 'whether real or imagined, [it] reinforces a Hobbesian view of the world in which the state of nature is the state of war, with individuals pitted against each other in the quest for survival' (2015: 108). It would appear that the inclusion of the cannibalism trope in *Cloud Atlas* would certainly work to reinforce this idea.

Regardless, the 'strange' customs that Ewing observes soon after in the Moriori village: Autua being ceremoniously whipped while a crowd of tribesmen and women watch on elocuting a strange humming sound, further implies a colonial construct of an imagined 'civilised' US/European society versus a 'savage' native community. The Wachowskis'<sup>135</sup> apparent conscious decision to depict the Chatham Islands as a tropical location – with 'unbearable' heat according to Ewing, works to maintain a cognitive link to the land of the Other as somewhere warmer, and therefore more exotic, than the imagined 'centre' associated with the more temperate climate of 'home'. In reality, located hundreds of kilometres southeast of New Zealand, temperatures in the Chatham Islands rarely rise above 22°C in the summer and winter day time temperatures peak at 5°C (*Chatham Islands Enterprise Trust* 2015).

Previous to the scene described above, where the 'savage' natives can be seen violently whipping Autua, protagonist Ewing visits some slave plantations with Dr. Goose and Moriori 'servant' Kupaka (Keith David). In the film's contemporary context, the plantations are significant in that they appear to have been included to facilitate a symbolic link to the

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<sup>135</sup> The Wachowskis and Tykwer divided their directorial responsibilities for *Cloud Atlas*, with the German director taking charge of the Cambridge/Edinburgh, San Francisco, and London stories, and the Wachowskis directing the Pacific Islands, Neo Seoul, and Hawaii narratives.

eighteenth century slave trade of the American deep-south, and in *Cloud Atlas*, those images are reconstituted here in the South Pacific (see figure 5.4.1).

This rather clumsy amalgamation of historical circumstances into one singular narrative draws attention to an agenda that is ultimately unconcerned with a factual depiction of actual events, rather it is one that, in the opinion of Estrada, demonstrates an example of the Wachowskis' 'Eurocentric liberal fantasy situating white US abolitionism at the cutting edge of 1800s world human liberation struggles' (2014: 11).

This study would support this statement and add that Hollywood can also often be accused of the same misrepresentations in consideration of other high-profile films like Mostow's *U-571* (2000) and Maté's *The Far Horizons* (1955) for example, which have both similarly fictionalised history in order to justify and promote pro-US discourses.<sup>136</sup> In this context, Estrada also correctly observes that the 'US plantation-style slavery featured in *Cloud*



**Figure 5.4.1:** *Cloud Atlas*' slave plantations on the Chatham Islands.

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<sup>136</sup> See von Tunzelmann (2009).

*Atlas* was simply not the hegemonic form of colonial Polynesian oppression in 1848' (2014: 15). The author's later comments regarding *Cloud Atlas*'s liberal standpoint being undermined by the directing trio's inability to 'differentiate between abolitionism, assimilation, anti-racism, and anti-settler colonialism,' (ibid.: 27)<sup>137</sup> would go some way to support King (2002) in his opinion that Hollywood/US cinema acts as a facilitator of neoliberal positions.

Turning attention to the dynamic of the relationship between Ewing and Autua; Ewing certainly assumes the position of white saviour to 'slave' Autua – a stowaway on the San Francisco-bound ship who becomes indebted to the American lawyer after he helps him gain a place among the ship's crew. This scenario follows colonial discourse in the manner that Autua himself claims that Ewing 'saved his life' from the 'savages' of the Chatham Islands; moreover throughout the voyage the character typifies the colonial Other<sup>138</sup> in the strong degree of loyalty he displays toward 'his master' Ewing.

This is underpinned by the fact that in many of their scenes together, particularly in the ship's storeroom, Autua is placed below Ewing from the camera's perspective: crouching as Ewing sits as they discuss their encounter in the village upon first meeting, and sitting whilst Ewing stands while American lawyer provides him food stolen from the captain's quarters. The master/slave relationship dynamic is confirmed in the story's penultimate scene where Autua risks his own life to protect Ewing from the murderous Dr. Goose who, it is revealed, has been slowly poisoning the protagonist throughout the voyage with the objective of obtaining his gold.

Concerning their relationship dynamic, this chapter would certainly concur with Estrada's analysis of the pair in which Autua is designated as a character that 'replicates the colonial fantasy that enslaved Africans will always give their lives for the good white master

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<sup>137</sup> It can be suggested that this distorted representation of history further vindicates the theses of Mignolo (2011), Kapur and Wagner (2013) and Akita that 'British imperial history can be seen as a bridge to global history' (2002: 2).

<sup>138</sup> See Bhabha's discussion of the master/slave Self/Other relationship (1990: 18).



race' (2014: 17). In this case, despite the fact that the character is supposed to be a Moriori, in a symbolic sense Estrada is actually correct to describe the character as an 'enslaved African' considering Autua's stereotypical central African accent and the Pacific Island story's cognitive links to images of the African slave trade. However, despite an explicit rejection of colonial racism in linguistic terms in *Cloud Atlas*, the embedded hierarchy exposed in the master/slave relationship of Ewing and Autua suggests a firm reconstruction of colonial discourse *vis-à-vis* the Self as superior to the Other.

The Kona tribe that terrorise the inhabitants of the Hawaiian Big Island in the year 2321 and engage the practice of eating their victims warrants attention in the context of cannibalism and its importance to colonial mentalities and notions of savage Otherness. Ng discusses cannibalism as the ultimate signifier of Otherness in Western literature:

...cannibalism remains one of the greatest taboos. As Western contact increased with New World cultures in the Americas, the Caribbean, and later on in the Pacific Islands, the widespread belief that these cultures practiced cannibalism came to symbolise the clear demarcation between Western civilisation and the pure savagery of native peoples. In the 1850s, English audiences were scandalised to discover that evidence of cannibalism had been found amongst the remains of John Franklin's lost Arctic expedition. Unable to believe that Englishmen would ever resort to such behaviour, Charles Dickens responded to this news by publishing a polemic that attributed the acts of cannibalism to the Inuit instead of the expedition's starving men' (2015: 109).

The subject of cannibalism is a theme that has captured the imagination over many years, and can be observed in many popular works of literature like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) and Kingsbury's *Courtship Rite* (1982). Demme's

*The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Bird's *Ravenous* (1999) and Hensleigh's *Welcome to the Jungle* (2007) demonstrate good examples from Hollywood cinema also.

Rings' discussion of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and the protagonist's ongoing fear of being eaten by the Caribs living on the neighbouring island as 'a process that highlights the subversive character of [Crusoe]'s radical individualism *vis-à-vis* European colonial discourse' (2011: 124) similarly reconstructed in *Cloud Atlas*'s Hawaii story also, where the peaceful existence of Zachry and his tribe is tainted by the periodical attacks of the murderous Kona cannibals.

The savage Otherness of the tribe and the enduring irrational fear of cannibalism in the US/European psyche is demonstrated in the scene where the Kona chief (played by Hugh Grant) slits the throat of Zachry's brother-in-law Adam (Jim Sturgess) and proceeds to lick the blade of the blood-stained knife. The close-up shot of the character's face as he slides the blade across his mouth, barely able to contain his appetite to feast upon human flesh, illustrates a cognitive reference to the colonial idea of the instinct-led Other unable to contain his or her desires. The ease with which the 'uncivilised' Kona 'savages' begin undertaking their abhorrent practice of consuming human flesh after the breakdown of the (relatively) 'civilised' society that existed before the nuclear apocalypse also highlights this fear. Additionally the long hair, body paint and skull trophies that each member of the Kona wears also serves to further Otherise the tribe and create symbolic links in the viewer's mind with the colonial discourse idea of the cannibal Other.

The Kona tribe's cannibalism, coupled with the master/slave relationship between Ewing and Autua, makes director Lana Wachowski's statement that *Cloud Atlas* 'proposes to envision a humanity that unites all of us and transcends our tribal differences' (see Estrada 2014: 10) problematic in that both scenarios reinforce central facets of colonial discourse; confirming racial and cultural hierarchies that invalidate the ostensive progressive agenda of the film.

### **5.5 Concluding Remarks**

*Cloud Atlas* is a film that actively attempts to disavow conservative corporatism, depicting Unanimity and energy company Swannekke as motivated by profit at the expense of human life and the environment; they are ruthlessly prepared to allow a nuclear reactor to go into meltdown and kill hundreds of thousands of people with the objective of persuading the American public that petroleum-based energy is a safer option in which to invest government funds. Furthermore, both institutions<sup>139</sup> are wholly presented in a one-dimensional manner that rejects humanistic principles and liberal values: with Swannekke representative of corporate boardroom misogyny and machismo, and Unanimity encapsulating institutional racism and worker exploitation.

Of *Cloud Atlas*' six stories, the Neo Seoul story goes furthest in its neoliberal critiques – bringing attention to how an adherence to the neoliberal expansionism exacerbates environmental problems, social discrimination, and wealth inequality. Within the framework of this loss confidence in neoliberal elites as reflected in the film's narrative, the character of Chang is significant. His role as a heroic revolutionary will be surprising for those who have read the novel in that Mitchell's Hae-joo is revealed to be a member of Unanimity, employed to manipulate Sonmi's 'ascension' and her call for revolution as way to turn the public against fabricants.

Considering this, why the reason for this adjustment in the character's role? It may be argued that this is simply down to various time and conceptual constraints, however the scene where Chang frees Sonmi from Papa Song's and the duo are attempting to escape the building in a laundry truck as discussed in 5.3 indicates something deeper, it attacks the idea of an imagined (white) authoritarian/racist corporative government, and promotes the notion of an (equally imagined) liberal, multiracial and morally superior underclass.

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<sup>139</sup> Adam Ewing's father-in-law Haskell Moore exploits human labour through his slave plantation business also.

This scene, along with the wider depiction of Union, could be interpreted as an attempt by the film's directors to denounce the aforementioned neoliberal practices and align the audience with the film's humanist perspective. This can be observed not just in the morality of Chang in saving Sonmi, but also in the way in which the dystopian corpocracy is depicted as in moral, environmental<sup>140</sup> and economic decline.

In this way, this investigation goes further than the argument of Estrada, who initially claims quite correctly in his research that *Cloud Atlas*'s six main protagonists 'bodies are marked by Western category oppressions of race, class, sexuality, age, and genetics. (2014: 2). However, Estrada fails to identify that the film draws attention to the fact that the agents of that oppression are clearly neoliberal institutions like Swanekke and Unanimity. In pointing the finger of blame in the direction of these establishments for the persecution of people on the basis of race, class, sexuality, age, and genetics, *Cloud Atlas* can undoubtedly be categorised as a feature that demonstrates a strong repudiation of the neoliberal model – something that would align with the opinions of Mcateer (2012) and Martin (2013).

For example, to select race as one of those categories of oppression, the subjugation of the colonial Other by the 'white master' in the Pacific Islands story appears to have been adapted to facilitate *Cloud Atlas*'s anti-neoliberal standpoint. To explain, inspired by his experience with Autua, at the climax of the film lawyer Ewing denounces his father-in-law Haskell Moore's participation in propagating the slave trade by burning the plantation holding agreement he signed with reverend Horrox (Hugh Grant) and announcing that he and wife Tilda (Doona Bae) will join the burgeoning abolitionist movement on the United States' east coast

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<sup>140</sup> A linkage can be drawn here with Blomkamp's *Elysium* in that this outcome once again illustrates the argument of Prudham on corporate-induced environmental degradation depicted in media and/or film as a 'drama which must be performed' (2009: 1596). In *Cloud Atlas*, this uber-capitalist society is portrayed as one that ultimately 'got what was coming to it', with the antagonistic corporate entity culpable for expansionist economic and environmental greed paying the ultimate price for its crimes.

thereby symbolically throwing support behind contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter for instance.

While this particular situation illustrates a firm rejection of mentalities associated with white superiority, *Cloud Atlas* on occasion promotes a particular brand of superficial liberalism: for example in discussion of the same scene Estrada reminds us that Ewing and Tilda's decision 'overlooks the ongoing local genocide of California Indians that culminated with the 1849 gold rush' (2014: 17). The same hollow liberal standpoint is detectable in the Neo Seoul story also. By analysing the narrative in-depth, we are able to see that dissatisfaction with the exploitative and relentless consumptionist tendency of everyday life in Neo Seoul is in actuality only communicated by rebel members of Union in the film. We are not provided with any evidence that the everyday citizens of the city state are actually repressed – and judging from the jovial customers pictured at Sonmi's former workplace Papa Song's at one point, by all accounts most even seem relatively content in their existence. Instead, the directors appear to assume here that the viewer will accept the Neo Seoul government's implied corruption, economic greed and authoritarianism as truth, which subverts any real anti-neoliberal (see Mayer 2017: n.p.) perspective to the film.

Indeed, it can be put forward that the directors of *Cloud Atlas* rely on embedded points of reference to assume without explicit transmission that large institutions are essentially corrupt, unethical, and tyrannical. Moreover, in an era where the need to address systemic problems is becoming increasingly urgent, a narrative in *Cloud Atlas* that promotes the idea that there has always been an ongoing struggle between a multiracial liberal minority and a conservative white majority constructs a simplistic binary narrative that overlooks the complexity and dynamism of the globalised world we live in today.

The situation of Sonmi and the exploitation of the fabricants for slave labour is a useful focal point in which to discern whether *Cloud Atlas* genuinely challenges the power dynamics

it seeks so urgently to bring to our attention. The viewer is certainly invited to interpret the mistreatment of fabricants as an objectionable scandal: on top of their terrible working conditions, at the end of their 'twelve-starred years of service' they are secretly taken to a giant ship and 'recycled' into Soap for other fabricant workers around the city state to consume after their long shifts.

In reality, the exploitation of labour (particularly immigrants) by large corporations remains a contentious issue in contemporary US politics, with many workers afforded insufficient protection by labour laws. In this context it may be argued that those who hold low-level, poorly-paid positions in society are crucial in maintaining the current neoliberal model as it exists today (see Butler 2015). When we compare the reality with the moralism displayed in *Cloud Atlas*, wider society can often be accused of indifference towards exploitation comparable to that of the scenario in the film. It is only when shocking tragedies such as the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh occur for example<sup>141</sup> that the difficult reality of neoliberal worker exploitation is inescapably brought into sharp focus within the public sphere. In these moments, Sonmi's dramatic escape from the oppressive conditions in which she is forced to work in Papa Song's – and her subsequent rise to become the catalyst for the revolutionary overthrow of a world 'corpocracy' – diverts attention away from the continued exploitation of millions of individuals by the neoliberal system.<sup>142</sup>

In the same manner, Sonmi's final public broadcast to the 'twelve states' would support the argument that the liberal framework to *Cloud Atlas* is at best compensatory. The speech's content<sup>143</sup> strongly indicates an acknowledgement towards a common humanity among people,

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<sup>141</sup> See *Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights* (2014).

<sup>142</sup> See Redmond's discussion of productions like Hyams' *Outland* (1981) and Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) highlight the 'reality of labour exploitation under capitalism' (2004: 55).

<sup>143</sup> Sonmi's speech is as follows: 'to be is to be perceived. And so to know thyself is only possible through the eyes of the other. The nature of our immortal lives is in the consequences of our words and deeds that go on and are pushing themselves throughout all time. Our lives are not our own, from womb to tomb, we are bound to others, past and present, and by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future.'

(something that *Cloud Atlas*'s institutions are implied to lack upon reflection of the evidence we have seen throughout the film) and the fact that the repercussions of it eventually leads to the downfall of Unanimity and of course, neoliberalism itself, perhaps highlights a good example of the ultimate liberal fantasy.

*Cloud Atlas* can undoubtedly be put forward as a feature that works hard to break with established narratives associated with colonial discourse, although there are elements of the phenomenon that are present in the film. While the characters of Chang and Ewing, both played by white actor Jim Sturgess, could be argued to appear in the same symbolic context as Sonmi in the way that they personify a rejection of institutionalised racism embodied in characters like Boardman Mephi and Haskell Moore, Lana Wachowski's assertion that the film 'merely proposes to envision a humanity that unites all of us and transcends our tribal differences' (Estrada 2014: 10) is invalidated by the pivotal role that the white characters play in the narrative's outcome. Although separated by a period of 300 years, lawyer Adam Ewing and Chang represent varying manifestations of the same value system, and through their actions and in their beliefs, they demonstrate characteristics preferable to US capitalist identity. For instance, the relationship between Ewing and Autua – and to a considerable extent Chang and Sonmi – can also be suggested to demonstrate continuities with the typical master/slave superior Self/inferior Other dichotomy as is presented by Rings (2011) in his discussion of Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe*.

We also see savage Otherness depicted in the Kona cannibals. Whereas Ng (2015) and Ferguson (2015) discuss cannibalism in Mitchell's book, highlighting the continuing role that this motif plays in subverting the rational superiority of the civilised Self in contemporary literature, this investigation is the first to highlight the motif's sustained relevance in cinema *vis-à-vis* the film adaptation of *Cloud Atlas* by drawing attention to a continuing tendency to

revert to stereotypical colonial imagery when presenting the audience with a recognisable illustration of the primitive Other.

By analysing closely the depiction of the Chatham Islands in 1849 and Neo Seoul 2144, *Cloud Atlas* displays a significant example of George Orwell's 'land of adventure' (Davidson 2001: 251). In the Hawaiian Big Isle story also, *Cloud Atlas* displays a repetition of classic Orientalist and colonial paradigms as seen in popular colonial-era novels such as Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), and in films like Bernhard's *Unknown Island* (1948), Kenton's *The Island of Lost Souls* (1932) and Cooper and Schoedsack's *King Kong* (1933). The invariable inclusion of this paradigm in contemporary cinema distances the audience from the familiar: an urbanised industrial cityscape representative of capitalist production – and brings into the narrative its antipode: an imagined strange and exotic 'land of adventure' that links to the colonial imagination.<sup>144</sup>

This is to the best of my knowledge the first scholarly investigation to bring attention to these postcolonial themes in *Cloud Atlas*. The film's significant impact as a multi-million-dollar grossing feature, the fact that it is the most expensive independent production of all time, and the directors' overt promotion of racial and gender liberalism (see Estrada 2014) set against the locale of colonialism-era racist institutions like Haskell Moore's slave plantation business, provide adequate enough impetus for further scrutiny of *Cloud Atlas* in a postcolonial context.

This investigation introduces a new line of argumentation into an as yet, relatively under-researched feature. While Ng (2015) offers insights into particular aspects of colonial discourse present in David Mitchell's book that are useful points of argumentation for the film version,

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<sup>144</sup> Said alludes to a similar construct in *Orientalism* stating that, for the European, the Orient 'was a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.' (1979: 1).



and Estrada (2014) debates *Cloud Atlas*'s contemporary social milieu, this chapter is the first to highlight the film's neoliberal tendencies and its attempts to criticise corporate power.

The findings of this chapter illustrate that even outside of Hollywood filmmaking boundaries, deep-rooted prejudices regarding racial and economic superiority continue to permeate global cinematic storytelling narratives. Despite this, taking into account the *Cloud Atlas*'s large budget and the creative freedom that its independent status gave the Wachowskis and Tykwer (not to mention their own vocal support for liberal causes as discussed by Abramovitch 2012), it appears that this is unintended. This leads us to question why these tropes are reconstructed in this instance: are the studios and/or directors' culpable? Or is the audience's deep-rooted storytelling preferences that perpetuate the continued presence of such stereotypical representations of the Self and the Other?

In any case, cognitive linkages to colonial discourse and formulaic cinematic conventions *vis-à-vis* white (US) individualistic heroism (see Ryan and Lenos 2012: 147) and inferior Otherness ultimately demonstrates that *Cloud Atlas*'s liberal-humanist worldview is one that can ultimately be branded as compromised by ingrained neoliberal codes of identity and hierarchy.

## **6. *Len Wiseman's Total Recall***

### **6.1 *Preliminary Remarks***

This thesis' final film analysis focuses upon Len Wiseman's 2012 remake of Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990). Adapted from Philip K. Dick's popular science fiction story *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale* (1966), the 2012 Hollywood version has been chosen for examination because of the centrality of wealth inequality, resource distribution and socio-economic marginality to the film's plot – namely the relative economic dominance that the 'United Federation of Britain' (UFB) has over the poorer, underdeveloped 'Colony'. Protagonist Douglas Quaid's (Colin Farrell) role as the reluctant leader of a rebellion against the supposedly authoritarian UFB marks *Total Recall* out as another possible example of a feature that may highlight the extent to which a diminishing loss of authority in neoliberal identity can be discerned in twenty-first century Hollywood cinema. Focusing on key scenes and characters in *Total Recall*, this chapter explores 1) in how far the feature offers a critique of corporate-led neoliberalism, 2) evidence of discontinuities and continuities of colonial and neoliberal representations within the narrative, and 3) the extent to which Quaid follows or breaks with previous lead protagonists analysed in stabilising neoliberal identity.

Upon reflection, Columbia Pictures evidently felt that *Total Recall* would be a source of profit on account of the popularity of Verhoeven's 1990 effort; released twenty-two years later, studio bosses undoubtedly targeted nostalgic fans of *Total Recall* '90 and anticipated that they

would take their children to see the remake.<sup>145</sup> The strategy was indeed successful and the film grossed close to \$200 million<sup>146</sup> despite the fact that it was unfavourably received by critics.<sup>147</sup>

Although there are a number of works discussing *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale* (Dick 1996, Bartelson 2006) and Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (Alleva 1990, Stuart 1990), Len Wiseman's 2012 remake remains relatively under-scrutinised in academic circles. The *Fine Art Diner* (2012) and Westfahl (2012) have each composed insightful critical essays discussing the story's political focus and socio-cultural context, Fernández-Menicucci (2014) on the other hand compares identity constructs in the latest incarnation of *Total Recall* with the previous works – as does Kolbuszewska (2015). These analyses apart, there is a considerable shortage of analytical literature on the 2012 version, and with an enquiry of the feature in this neoliberal context, this study hopes to close the gap in research on Wiseman's *Total Recall*.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the film's mainstream reviews lack any real critical rigour, however Chang (2012), Corliss (2012) and O'Hehir's (2012) respective articles help to initiate a discussion. The trio are uniform in their opinion that *Total Recall* fails to deliver upon promising allusions to contemporary political issues, with O'Hehir criticising the filmmakers for being 'more concerned with Colin Farrell's muscular frame...than with political allegory' (2012: n.p.) for example. Wallace also comments that 'action-packed chases and a handful of *Minority Report* moments do not a great movie make [sic]. Neither does layering on a little War on Terror propaganda and class revolt just to add a patina of modern urgency' (2012: n.p.). This study would disagree and argue that subplot allegories of issues like the 'War on Terror' deserve further attention in that such components are often key indicators toward the discursive perspectives of the studios, writers, directors and producers.

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<sup>145</sup> Corliss also observed this and wrote: 'audiences can be counted on to see a remake of a venerable hit rather than some work of startling originality...' (2012: n.p.).

<sup>146</sup> See *Internet Movie Database* (2015).

<sup>147</sup> Morgenstern called the film a 'totally dehumanised remake' in comparison to the 1990 movie, 'which was clever and playful, as well as exciting and hugely impactful' (2012: n.p.); the *Daily Mail*'s Tookey also branded *Total Recall* 'entirely unmemorable' (2012: n.p.).

Westfahl's essay adds depth to the critical analysis debate when reflecting upon his comments on the 'strangely anachronistic' (2012: n.p.) nature of *Total Recall*. Westfahl claims that the story displays an 'inability to imagine what the world might really be like at the end of the 21st century' (ibid.). Westfahl does however disagree with Wallace, adding that *Total Recall*'s political dynamic creates a space for genuine self-reflective questions to be asked:

Instead of fighting for the freedom of oppressed Martians, this film's rebels are fighting to achieve independence for the Colony; and since that society has become a melting pot of people from numerous cultures, this situation potentially allows the story to resonate with all sorts of anti-colonial wars throughout history, though the film never takes advantage of the opportunity (2012: n.p.).

Reflecting further upon Fernández-Menicucci's interesting comparative analysis, it is not difficult to understand how often seemingly insignificant elements in film narratives display epochal and/or discursive indicators. For example, in contrast to Verhoeven's effort, which the author believes is 'precariously poised in-between postcoloniality and *fin-de-siècle* anxieties', Fernández-Menicucci claims that Wiseman's *Total Recall*, 'was gestated in the post-9/11 era of globalised uncertainties' (2014: 5). Bearing this in mind, the way that the film clearly appropriates actual political rhetoric and television news terminology familiar to audiences since the War on Terror was initiated means that Fernández-Menicucci's assertion warrants further scrutiny.

Corliss' (2012) review of *Total Recall* indicates an understanding of Hollywood's role in performing an escapist function for the spectator. His remark on the function of films as 'wish fulfilment,' and not a mechanism that provides the 'reinforcement of the audience's feelings of frustration...' (ibid.: n.p.), would concur with the arguments of Belton (2005) and Cornea (2007) who conclude that, aside from simple entertainment, Hollywood performs an important role in distracting the audience's attention from everyday problems.

The *Fine Art Diner*'s essay on the other hand concludes that *Total Recall* is 'wholly capitalist':

...the Resistance fighters are making people realise that socialism doesn't treat workers fairly and it's in socialism that workers don't get to advance, but have to stay on the assembly line all their lives, the real purpose of capitalism is to give workers – not only their rights – but advancement chances and opportunities for self-fulfilment (2012: n.p.).

The extent to which the film disseminates anti-socialist themes in favour of typical capitalist ideas certainly demands to be examined further in this chapter when one takes into account the numerous linkages to symbols of twenty-first century neoliberalism in *Total Recall*. This study also aims to challenge the claims of Wallace and Corliss – who largely dismiss the film's failed socio-political standpoint.

In response to Rieder – who writes that contemporary Hollywood films display a tendency to depict antagonist representatives of neoliberal power structures as the victims of violent emotional attacks (2011: 42), this investigation of *Total Recall* will begin (6.2) by analysing two key scenes in which prominent members of the UFB government are confronted by protagonist Quaid. In 6.3, the Resistance movement will be scrutinised for evidence of representational tendencies that could be linked to adjustments in the epochal representation of contemporary neoliberalism. Before concluding this investigation, the spatial construction of the Colony and memory-implant facility Rekall will be interrogated (6.4), along with the portrayal of female leads Melina (Jessica Biel) and Lori (Kate Beckinsale), to determine in how far *Total Recall* breaks with traditional colonialism.

## 6.2 *Fantasies of Resistance?*

There are two particular moments in *Total Recall* that are worth analysing in-depth as they both bear a resemblance to fight scenes in the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas*, Cameron's *Avatar* and Blomkamp's *District 9*. They also appear to follow other Hollywood films like Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002) and Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2003) in placing into the narrative symbolic instances in which individuals representative of high-level corporations or governments are killed.

The first example of this comes as Quaid is plugged into the memory implant machine at Rekall and inadvertently discovers that he used to be a secret agent. As this revelation is relayed to the audience, UFB guards burst into the room and the protagonist manages to single-handedly overcome the group of armed men. Rieder suggests that comparable scenes in *Avatar*, *District 9* and Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) can be linked to a dissatisfaction with contemporary US imperialism and public anger *vis-à-vis* the repeated failure of neoliberal policies to provide social stability.

It is useful to begin by articulating the difference between symbolism and typical filmic violence, which is elaborated upon by Rieder:

Meting out violent retributive 'justice' to a criminalised or vilified individuals or groups has been a typical and enduring feature of much mass cinema, as in the shootouts that have brought closure to so many Westerns and crime and police dramas over the decades. One might be tempted to write off filmmakers' pandering to the public's thirst for violent spectacle as merely the debt popular fiction pays to human nature. Yet the current crop of vengeance killings is not only insistently moralistic...but directed at white men in positions of power and authority (2011: 42).

In the film's early stages, Quaid's frustrations with life as a factory worker and the repeated demands of the site's management for him to work double shifts sees him give in to his curiosities and visit Rekall. Scrutinising the scene inside the facility and the conversation between Quaid and 'rep' Bob McClane (John Cho) about the ramifications of receiving memory implants, a claim to advance the suggestion of a symbolic underpin can be substantiated.

The conversation itself not only brings philosophical debates on the very nature of reality and reality perception to the fore (See Tomlinson 2015, Rushton 2010, Black 2002) – a concept Hollywood has previously explored in Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Huddles' *After the Dark* (2013) and the Wachowskis' *Matrix* franchise (1999, 2003a, 2003b), but the fact that Quaid's life becomes the very fantasy of escape that he was looking for is particularly interesting.

For example Quaid asks McClane of the implant: '...it feels like real life?' To which he responds: 'what is life but our brain's chemical perception of it?' Quaid counters with '...an illusion no matter how convincing is still an illusion'. In order to convince Quaid further, McClane then says: 'you're here because you feel like some thing's missing. You got some tug, some longing for something more. We're going to give you that thing. Tell us your fantasy'. The latter section of McClane's statement suggests a deeper demand to fulfil that essential missing component.

Quaid's next act after McClane's commentary is to sit down in the chair and prepare to embrace the 'fantasy' of being a secret agent. Although he is aware that the memories he will receive are not real, Quaid is prepared to engage with them regardless, knowing that the reality of his 'everyday life' cannot fulfil his desires. Ironically however, Quaid's fantasy is not required as it is revealed that he is actually a secret agent.

It can be argued that the viewer is asked to indulge the fantasy provided by Quaid's adventure instead: in a shot that is delivered in one impressive take, Quaid proceeds to take out

ten UFB soldiers in spectacular fashion. When linking Quaid and McClane's conversation introduced above with the action that immediately follows, Rieder's comments on such scenes 'alluding to the fundamental social issue of the distribution of the right to violence, in each case seizing it from the "evil" representatives of the fictional status quo and wielding it against them in the name of justice' (2011: 42) seems relevant.<sup>148</sup>

Disappointingly, *Total Recall*'s filmmakers have been reluctant to publicly disclose their political points of view in any great detail, nevertheless in an on-set interview conducted during the film's production, Wiseman and producer Toby Jaffe both expressed limited but valuable comments that appear to reveal their political perspectives. In a discussion regarding *Total Recall*'s allegory of social and economic inequality, Jaffe describes the issue as 'the kind of dynamic we're into; classic working class people against the wealthy who control the real estate, and want to control the real estate of the planet' (Sciretta 2012: n.p.). Wiseman then adds that in real life, such controversies are complicated by 'the propaganda machine, which is always current' (ibid.).

That primary antagonist Cohaagen (played by Bryan Cranston) is depicted negatively as controllers of this real estate perhaps points to anti-capitalist standpoint from the filmmakers; the manner in which it distances *Total Recall* from other prominent Hollywood features like Favreau and Black's *Iron Man* series (2008, 2010, 2013) for instance, where protagonist Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) engages his considerable wealth for the good of the general public, might support this too.<sup>149</sup> In *Total Recall*, Cohaagen uses his power for his own rapacious agenda: consolidating his own real estate empire, allegedly orchestrating terrorist attacks on his own people, and employing McCarthyist tactics to blame the Resistance freedom movement for the UFB's various social difficulties. It is the dissemination of this high-level corruption

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<sup>148</sup> Corliss' (2014) opinion on films as wish fulfilment would appear to have some substance here also.

<sup>149</sup> The good-natured intentions of fictional altruistic billionaires like Stark and Wayne seemingly demonstrate that capitalism can be a force for good – if it is entrusted to the right people.



and abuse of power that confirms a liberal perspective to *Total Recall* and furthermore invalidates the *Fine Art Diner's* comments regarding the role that the Resistance play in undermining socialism. For example here, Cohaagen is actively subverting capitalism by taking advantage of systemic deficiencies that allow wealthy individuals to exploit the wider populace.

However, a prominent question here is that if *Total Recall* is constructed as a liberal film, to what extent is this outlook justified? The answer to this can perhaps be found in an analysis of the film's climactic scene. After the attack at Rekall, Quaid's life as an average factory worker is over and a frantic hour or so of non-stop chase action ensues as the protagonist strives to escape UFB agents and discover the truth to his enigmatic past. Quaid's journey of self-discovery leads him to find out that he was Doug Hauser – 'the greatest intelligence agent alive' (in the words of counterfeit wife Lori). The narrative leads him to a showdown with antagonist Cohaagen atop the Fall gravity elevator as the latter conducts an invasion into the Colony for the sake of securing more living space for an overcrowded UFB.

In this scene, the metaphorical sense of foreboding concerning the UFB's imminent invasion is present in a number of factors that comprise the *mise-en-scène*: the unceasing heavy rain, the night time setting, and the many visual elements of the set that are prorated black and white for example. These elements work to emphasize the immanent climax to the imagined 'moral struggle' in *Total Recall*.

The ocular aesthetic of the fight scene bears a resemblance to classical depictions of gladiatorial contests comparable to Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) and Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960): with the roof of the Fall carriage forming an amphitheatre-like structure, the helipad replicating the battle floor itself and the posture/close quarters combat method of fighting between the two characters mirroring the stance of duelling warriors (see figure 6.2.1). The stylistic decision to stage the showdown in this way could simply be interpreted as classic Hollywood filmic



**Figure 6.2.1:** The final fight scene in *Total Recall*.

formula (see O’Hehir 2012), however the significant decision to re-enact historical imagery and dichotomies of space warrants a more detailed analysis be put to the scene.

The cognitive reference to Roman history and the lack of actual advanced technology used in this battle by the protagonist and primary antagonist (one might observe that

Cohaagen's robotic foot soldiers inexplicably decide to take up a spectator's role throughout) could be linked to the re-enactment of colonial discourse *vis-à-vis* the idea of possession and European masculine identity in that the 'prize' for the victor of the fight between these two alpha males is able claim ownership of the colonial space (i.e. the Colony itself). Although this is an assertion that needs to be investigated in detail later in the chapter, the extent to which the unfolding events of the fight align with Rieder's (2011: 42) contention that symbols of past colonial aggression are today often vilified in Hollywood film is the more prominent concern that must be addressed here.

Signifiers concerning Coahaagen's antagonistic qualities are considerable despite his relatively limited screen time: *Total Recall*'s production team appears to have drawn upon the post 9/11 rhetoric, appearance and body language of mainstream neoconservative politicians to enunciate this. For example, in a televised press conference discussing a terrorist train bombing at the beginning of the film Coahaagen states: 'as much as I want to focus our efforts on cleaning up the Colony, today's terrorist attacks means that funding will have to go to bolstering our synthetic federal police force'. Later on, he justifies an invasion by accusing the unseen Colony governor of funding Matthias' (Bill Nighy) rebel movement.

The chancellor's blatant political opportunism evokes the contents of Tony Blair's Bloomberg speech analysed in 1.3 where the former UK Prime Minister called for the West to set aside its differences with Russia and China in order to unite and focus upon 'the single biggest threat to peaceful coexistence in the world today': radical Islam (see *The Telegraph* 2014a). In the same way, Coahaagen can also be suggested to follow Ahmed's opinion of Blair as someone who views the world as an 'essential battle between benevolent capitalists and mad fundamentalists' (2014: n.p.). Again here, a lack of information in the public domain with regard to the filmmakers' political opinions makes such a claim merely speculative, however the attempts to portray Coahaagen in this manner points to a rejection of neoconservative politics

in *Total Recall* by the film's storywriters: the question comes down to in how far such criticisms should be regarded as genuine.

Once again during the final battle, the subject of identity and its link to the concept of reality is invoked in the scene's climactic moment. Here Coahaagen asks: 'you're still fighting and you don't even know who you are', to which Quaid replies defiantly 'I may not remember who I was, but I know who I am'.<sup>150</sup> The response is problematic as one may feel entitled to ask: 'so who are you?'

In order to formulate an explanation for this, it is necessary to come full circle and return to Rieder's (2011) proposition on the violent killings of older white males in films functioning as 'revenge' for history of US imperial actions. Taking into account the evidence provided in the other chapters of this thesis, a clear pattern seems to be emerging regarding a particular form of identity that is to be found in the protagonist: someone who originates from within the neoliberal social order but does not associate or consider themselves complicit with the overt prejudice and inhumanity of its governments and/or corporations.

In disposing of the villainous Coahaagen, protagonist Quaid appears representative of this in *Total Recall*. Indeed, regarding his response, the question is answered in the viewer's mind as no explicit elaboration on the retort 'I know who I am' is forthcoming. Who Quaid has become is assumed to be known implicitly: he is the antithesis of Coahaagen. What is evident in his killing of Coahaagen is that Quaid certainly does not identify himself with the UFB's expansionist ambitions in any way.

When Quaid stabs Coahaagen, the inclusion of the subsequent twist of the knife and close up shot of the acute pain on the antagonist's face from the viewer's perspective demonstrates

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<sup>150</sup> This line can be argued to illustrate another example of Edward Said's novelistic hero paradigm: a component which itself has been established as central to Western identity constructs in literature since colonial times. As discussed in chapter two, Said claimed that in each novelistic hero case, the narrative ends 'with the protagonists' accession to stability...in the form of confirmed identity' (1994: 71); in this case Quaid's statement would seem to support this.

a comparable instance of Rieder's theory in that it possibly illustrates the extent to which the film is going to in order to appease the audience's frustrations towards the 'institutionalised power structures' (ibid.: 42) that comprise neoliberal nations' governments and corporations. In *Total Recall*'s case this would be the disregard for the majority to cater for the interests of few; an issue brought into sharp focus in the fallout of the 2008 global economic crisis. In a final offering of restitution, it can be suggested that audience *Schadenfreude* is further attended to as Cohaagen is left on top of the Fall to plunge into the burning elevator shaft.

If one were to accept that this has some substance, it would indicate a manifestation of palpable dissatisfaction with neoliberalism and its imperialistic tendencies in *Total Recall*. However, a more in-depth analysis of key characters is necessary to determine whether the film can be considered one that subverts neoliberal patterns.

### **6.3 (Left-)Liberalism in Total Recall?**

There are significant differences between Paul Verhoeven's 1990 version of *Total Recall* and Len Wiseman's effort (see Fernández-Menicucci 2014), the degree to which these can be put down to simple stylistic preference or epochal demands is something that needs to be investigated further in this subchapter. To begin with, if we are to accommodate the idea that *Total Recall* criticises the imperial tendencies of the United States and the United Kingdom by allegorising their expansionist actions and the negative effect that neoliberal economic policy has on exacerbating global income disparity, then it is necessary to now examine the portrayal of the Resistance for evidence of tendencies that could be linked to adjustments in the epistemological representation of contemporary neoliberalism.

A contextual overview of Quaid's life circumstance is also required in order to build upon the discussion in 6.2. At the beginning of the film, *Total Recall* introduces the audience to a man full of frustrations with regard to a life of unfulfilled ambitions: a discontented Quaid has

recurring dreams that involve thrilling shootouts with the authorities, he declares how he always wanted to learn the piano but never had the chance, and complains openly to friend Harry (Bokeem Woodbine) about the repetitive daily grind of his commute to the UFB on The Fall:

Has it ever occurred to you that we always sit in these exact same seats? For years now...why? I'm talking about us following the same routine...day after day, year after year without even questioning it.

Reflecting upon the first twenty minutes of *Total Recall* it is difficult to disagree with Tomlinson's description of Quaid as an individual who faces only 'drudgery, powerlessness and prejudice every day of his waking life' (2015: n.p.). His longing for a fulfilling existence can be quite readily associated again here to the notion that there has been a loss in confidence in the idea that US-led neoliberalism can provide social stability in that, despite his above-average intelligence and ambition, he finds himself stuck in a dead-end factory job.

This circumstance does not last however, and in this way actor Colin Farrell believes that the central message of *Total Recall* is one of redemption: 'the story of a man who's going from being lost in the quagmire of his own irrelevant existence to arriving at a place of greater emotional sustenance' (*Empire Magazine* 2012: 26). Reflecting upon this comment, it is useful to return again to Quaid's 'I know who I am' response uttered seconds before he ruthlessly stabs Coahaagen at the film's climax. In explicitly rejecting his previous life as a 'ruthless' (Cohaagen's words) secret agent representing the tyrannical UFB, Quaid reaches this 'place of greater emotional sustenance' at the same moment he aligns himself with a different form of identity that is alluded to quite conspicuously throughout *Total Recall*'s story arc. Exactly which form of identity this is requires more investigation.

At the very beginning of the film, Quaid awakens from his dream about Melina to find that there has been 'another bombing in the UFB', which shows that Wiseman's remake retains

the 'Resistance as terrorists/freedom fighters' trope from Verhoeven's version. However where *Total Recall* 2012 differs slightly is that it incorporates heavily cognitive references from the War on Terror – as well as the now familiar dramatised reporting methods employed by major news networks like Fox, BskyB and the BBC.

Throughout the film, the extent to which many perceive the news readers to be delivering their bulletins without critical questioning of the facts, and their disproportionate devotion of air time to the McCarthyist agenda of Coahaagen,<sup>151</sup> represents a form of frustration on the part of Wiseman and the scriptwriters with regard to this type of still media reporting and the tendencies of contemporary news outlets like Fox News in particular to exaggerate when reporting major stories – especially when we refer back to the director's comments on the 'current propaganda machine' (see Sciretta 2012: n.p.).

The issue has become quite central to public debate in recent years in the US (Gourevitch and Shinn 2007), arguably becoming the subject of intense focus in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion and the misinformation scandal with regard to 'weapons of mass destruction' (see Masri 2003). Either way, the inclusion of rolling media and its stylistic use as running commentary on events throughout *Total Recall* can be said to indicate a substantial criticism of the part that news plays in establishing/maintaining narratives preferable to corporate/elite government interest within contemporary US society, an aspect of the narrative that would also confirm Fernández-Menicucci's assertion that *Total Recall* 2012 was 'gestated in the post-9/11 era of globalised uncertainties' (2014: 5).

Analysing in more detail the aforementioned news report, while it parodies the partisan nature of US news in favour of corporate and establishment interest (and engages the subject of terrorism for narrative purposes), it must also be pointed out that, in its portrayal of the

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<sup>151</sup> Who, as discussed, uses a press conference on the bombing to justify diverting federal money from assisting the Colony to increasing production of the robotic police force for security purposes.

Resistance, *Total Recall* completely avoids a controversial elaboration of the right-wing media's often dehumanising depiction of Muslims – with any growing anxiety on the part of the audience that the Resistance are religious fundamentalists dismissed within five minutes of the film's opening in a news bulletin.

This is decisive in support of the argument above regarding the way in which *Total Recall* looks to delineate Quaid from the neoliberal agenda of Cohaagen. In fact one may even go as far as to say that leader Matthias' cause is glorified: his name is known widely amongst the populace of both territories and his voice can be heard on primetime news reciting the movement's catchy slogan: 'the Fall enslaves us all'. Most notably however his picture is displayed in one of the reports on a giant screen, confirming the leader's whiteness.

For one, this confirms that he is not a crazed, irrational Islamist Other; secondly, it works to construct the Resistance as both 'noble' and justified in their actions. A look at Matthias' demands show that they are 'merely' economic – corresponding appropriately with the popular discourse of 'greedy corporate capitalism'. Matthias' primary grievance lays in the exploitative nature of the UFB's economic relationship with the Colony, seeing the Fall as a symbol of oppression that facilitates that exploitation. In this way, such economic frustrations are something that many can readily identify with when considering high levels of personal debt in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (See *OECD Household Debt* 2017) as linked to the 2008 economic crisis.

Taking into account Cohaagen's portrayal as representative of white corporate power (see 6.2) and the invariable multicultural appearance of the Resistance, it can be suggested that critical to the composition of *Total Recall's* anti-neoliberal narrative is the idea that there is pseudo-progressive/liberal centre (embodied in the Resistance), struggling against the (implied) archaic, conservative ethics of a white ruling class that champions exploitative neocolonialism and pursues neoliberal economic policy. This study asserts that *Total Recall* can be said to



construct a preferred identity closely aligned to this liberal character. Moreover, linking this to the economic underpin of the Resistance's cause, the audience are encouraged to reject the avaricious agenda of the UFB and rationalise/approve of the freedom fighting terrorists of the Resistance.

The next section of this chapter will interrogate *Total Recall*'s portrayal of the Colony and memory-implant facility Rekall to ascertain in how far those spaces might break with traditional colonial ideas of Otherness and support the film's anti-neoliberal tendencies.

#### **6.4 Neoliberal Continuities? Revisiting 'the Colony'**

If *Total Recall* is to be regarded as a film that destabilises neoliberal norms, then the degree to which colonial dichotomies are current/re-enacted is surely crucial in determining whether such a statement is accurate. Reflecting upon the findings of the *District 9* and *Elysium* investigations respectively, it seems necessary that this subchapter should commence by scrutinising the spatial composition of the UFB and the Colony in light of the decision by the scriptwriters to explicitly reconstruct a narrative of Empire.

In this context, it is interesting to note that up until late in the film's production stage, the Colony was tentatively entitled 'New Asia', and the Fall was to be known as the 'China Fall'. In an on-set interview however, director Wiseman revealed that this was vetoed by Columbia Pictures in the production stage because the studio wanted the Colony to encompass a more 'multicultural' atmosphere:

It was one of the concerns of the studio about being so specific about... it was slanting too much to where we were saying that was the entire culture, and it's not. It's meant to be a melting pot of an entire society... it's two surviving zones and the working class is a combination, a melting pot, of many different races and cultures and such. It also

informs why the architecture is a mix and blend of everything. And it seemed like it was too specific (Eisenberg and Rich 2012: n.p.).

It is possible that the issue here could be one of marketability; with studio bosses concerned about potentially offending Chinese audiences – a key emerging market for Hollywood film in terms of box office receipts from the mid-2000s onwards.<sup>152</sup> It could also be said that the idea of the Colony as a cultural melting pot best serves Hollywood stereotypical audience perceptions of Otherness territory when we look back on, for example, Old Seoul in the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas* (2012), LA of 2019 in Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and Zion in the Wachowskis' *The Matrix: Reloaded* (2003a) and *The Matrix: Revolutions* (2003b).

Regardless, *Total Recall* introduces a territorial scenario familiar to contemporary Hollywood sci-fi cinema: an environmentally-ravaged, divided Earth, of which 80% of the planet's habitat has been destroyed by 'chemical warfare'. On one hand we have the UFB, ostensibly symbolising an ironic repetition of history *vis-à-vis* the restoration of the British Empire to the position of a leading world power.<sup>153</sup> This space is presented as being economically thriving, rationally ordered, and certainly more aesthetically familiar to many viewers in the manner in which, as a bustling business centre, is it reminiscent of the present-day City of London. This once more draws attention to the extent to which *Total Recall* takes cues from major twenty first century world events – in this case the 2008 economic crash – to construct its anti-neoliberal message.

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<sup>152</sup> China has enjoyed a heightened profile on-screen in major Hollywood motion pictures over the last 10 years. The country's role as 'saviours of the world' in Emmerich's *2012* (2009) was a notable turning point with regard to the country's presence in mainstream storylines.

<sup>153</sup> It also aligns to a contemporary formulaic tendency to depict the United States as a country in hegemonic decline. Something seen in Johnson's *Looper* (2012), Blomkamp's *Elysium* and the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas* (see Kalb 2013).



**Figure 6.4.1:** Establishing shot of the Colony from behind Quaid.

In contrast to the UFB, the Colony physically consists of elements typical to conventional representations of colonial space in literature and film (see figure 6.4.1), comprised as it is with maze-like winding narrow alleyways, exotic food stalls and overcrowded, bustling market places. The Orientalisation of the Colony is overarchingly present however in the less-than-conspicuous references to Asian culture (despite the directed scripting changes) and the majority Asian/Arab/black population.

To accentuate this binary, in the scenes where Quaid wanders the Colony's red light district contemplating whether or not to visit Recall, the viewer is constantly bombarded with a cacophony of generic, inaudible dialects, foreign-language signboards, and images of

individuals wearing conical hats selling products in floating markets. Moreover, the symbolic designation of English as a minority language within the Colony (or at most a lingua franca) as opposed to its 'native' tongue, validates its formulation as a space fundamentally belonging to the Other.

Focusing upon the Rekall facility itself, a link to Homi Bhabha's typical Oriental encapsulations of 'the stereotype....and the mysterious' (1994: 73) is observable in the scriptwriters' decision to also 'Orientalise' the brand. Contrasting with Verhoeven's depiction of Rekall as a typical US workplace setting synonymous with corporate America, the facility in the 2012 version has been reconstructed to resemble a futuristic version of an Oriental-style



**Figure 6.4.2:** Orientalisation of the 'Rekall' brand.

guesthouse. The exterior of the building comprises Asian roof architecture, features hanging red Chinese lanterns and has the Rekall logo translated into Arabic, Chinese and Japanese above the main door. The interior is highly exoticised; dimly-lit with scented candles and Buddhist-themed décor, and is visually evocative of a Chinese opium den (see figure 6.4.2).

Edward Said's comments on the Orient as a place of 'remarkable experiences' (1978: 2) can also be observed in the fact that Rekall, the symbolised embodiment of this construct, literally offers remarkable experiences to its clients. In this way, the images of the UFB as more familiar to the contemporary City of London versus the Colony as a stereotypical Asian city reinforces the Orientalist construct of non-European cities as consisting of 'labyrinthine spatial structures indicative of decay and a descent into urban squalor' that 'contrasts with the orderly and rational form of both Roman and European cities' (Horton 2007: 9). Such a trope indicates a strong continuity with colonial discourse in *Total Recall*.

It is often claimed that lead male heroes in European literature personify a 'coloniser's spirit' in the manner that they demonstrate individualist tendencies, superior intelligence and rational resourcefulness (see Memmi 1965, Said 1994, Bhabha 1994). Many postcolonial scholars also argue that contemporary Hollywood film protagonists exhibit character traits that can be readily linked to particular historical representations of European superiority in colonial discourse (Shohat and Stam 1994, Bernstein and Studlar 1997, Trinder 2012).<sup>154</sup> However, as society has developed over the centuries, so have the nature of these representations of superiority. In cinema they are today on the whole distinctly less explicit when compared with past literature and pre-WWII film, meaning that one often has to analyse in much more detail for evidence of such linkages.

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<sup>154</sup> See 1.5.

In the case of *Total Recall*, upon closer inspection the events that proceed Quaid's traumatic encounter within the confines of the Rekall facility (like *Avatar*'s Sully and *Elysium*'s Da Costa) can be aligned with Said's 'novelistic hero' paradigm (1994: 71). To elaborate on this proposal, we discover later in the film that Quaid's former alias Hauser accepted the foundational reasoning of Matthias' Resistance movement. As a consequence of this he was captured by Cohaagen's men and has his memory wiped before briefly managing to escape and leaving a cryptic message for Quaid (his new identity) with details of how to contact prominent figures in the Resistance.<sup>155</sup> Later in the film when he is taken by Melina to the Resistance's secret hideout, the duo are greeted at the threshold by three guards. The racial identity of each – representing the major ethnic groups of the US: black, Asian and Latino, conveys an interesting point of discussion in this colonial milieu. As Quaid is questioned about his identity by the trio and his allegiance is confirmed, a relieved tough-looking black guard walks forward and proceeds to embrace the protagonist.<sup>156</sup> The encounter arguably illustrates a racial hierarchy that affirms the multiracial Resistance's own inferiority to white man Quaid,<sup>157</sup> and once inside, Quaid's comments to Melina: 'everyone here seems to know me', followed by 'I can see he [Hauser] meant a lot to these guys', which is uttered amidst shots of the multiracial Resistance soldiers' overt deference towards the protagonist, reinforces the Quaid's destiny as the novelistic hero as put forward by Said (ibid.).

In the same way, despite Matthias' ostensible patriarchal leadership of the movement, it is actually Quaid who is attributed messiah like-status as the Colony's saviour and liberator in

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<sup>155</sup> This demonstrates a prominent discontinuity with Verhoven's *Total Recall* where Quaid's identity is revealed to have been intentionally created by Cohaagen and Hauser as part of a plot to infiltrate the Resistance.

<sup>156</sup> The hug itself is particularly interesting in that it initially seems to highlight a break with typical hyper-masculine representations of lead males in Hollywood like John McClane in the *Die Hard* series (1988, 1990, 1995, 2007, 2013) and of course, Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Total Recall* 1990 (see Kord and Krimmer 2011). In this context, it could be suggested to demonstrate a consideration by the scriptwriters of changing attitudes in US society *vis-à-vis* males who are 'more in touch with their feminine sides' - something seen in Meyers' *What Women Want* (2000) for instance.

<sup>157</sup> The depiction of the Resistance as a multi-racial underclass represented by all colours and creeds versus the whiteness of the UFB also destabilises earlier attempts at portraying the socio-economic situation in the film as a class struggle.

both this scene and at the film's climax wherein he 'saves' the supposedly defenceless population from the UFB invasion. In further support of the notion that Quaid exemplifies Said's novelistic hero paradigm, the protagonist's fate is strategically contextualised at various points throughout *Total Recall*. Like Sully and Da Costa, who begin their respective stories experiencing the same longing for something more, Quaid also desires a life that his impoverished surroundings cannot provide.

This wider trend to depict leading protagonists living with innate lacks in their existence might be suggested to point to a conformist, ideological agenda when one takes into account Ryan and Lenos' discussion of Nichols' romantic comedy-drama *Working Girl* (1988), of which the authors state:

Films are mostly ideological, when, in the face of extremes of deprivation and potential anger, the foster false hope and futile aspiration, as well as a feeling that society's institutions, regardless of what inequalities they produce, are just and right (2012: 178).

This investigation takes this suggestion further by applying it to *Total Recall* and proposes that the repetitive inclusion of this component in Hollywood film stories – as seen across epochs in Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990), Berg's *Hancock* (2008), Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013) also – can perhaps also be linked to frustrations with regard to societal immobility. However, although Ryan and Lenos may have a point, the way in which the films' respective heroes consequently escape from their respective lives of drudgery and ultimately find themselves as recognised saviours of the Other appeals more directly to colonial thought.

The depiction of Quaid in possession of superior physical and mental abilities is invariably part of this also: identical to Sully for example, we discover that Quaid retains his exceptional fighting skills and superior intelligence from his previous life as Hauser in the fight scene at Rekall as discussed in 6.2. The protagonist's superior competences are also confirmed

at various points in the narrative: initially by Lori who, as introduced previously, states explicitly that Hauser was(is) the 'greatest intelligence agent alive'; and later by Cohaagen, who ominously claims when conversing with a captured Matthias that one should 'never underestimate the power of one man', before shooting Quaid a quick glance.

Indeed, the latter point is vindicated as Quaid stops the UFB invasion of the Colony single-handedly: firstly, by setting the timed bombs on the Fall carriage, and then secondly killing Cohaagen. In doing this, Quaid destroys two 'long time symbols of economic and political oppression' (quoting the film's rolling news report here), and forces the Colony to a standstill. Immediately after this, we see the (majority Asian) population of the state gathering to gaze on in astonishment at the devastated Fall terminal. In a grand act of altruism comparable to Wikus in *District 9* saving the alien 'prawns', and Da Costa in *Elysium* granting the Earth citizens access to the medical machinery on the Elysian base, Quaid is confirmed as demi-god saviour of the Other.

Finally, Fernández-Menicucci (2014) and Westfahl's assertion that *Total Recall's* 'story has also been modified to better accord with the sensibilities of the twenty-first century' (2012: n.p.) in that the depiction of Quaid's wife Lori and his girlfriend and ally Melina represent a break with sexist gender portrayals is particularly problematic. In an interview with popular internet comic book fan site *Comicbookmovie*, director Wiseman was asked how important it was to have two strong female characters like Lori and Melina in the film (Wilding 2012: n.p.). He responded to this question with:

I think it's very important, especially nowadays. I've always been into bringing a very strong female into this kind of arena and this is the kind of film I grew up with. The Ripley's and the Sarah Connor's, and I've always admired the very strong female roles within these kind of films and often think they can be played a little bit too flirtatious, a



little bit too overtly sexy, and I think you lose a little bit of the credibility then. So, I'm such an advocate of it and I enjoy movies that present characters like that, and it's fun creating them as well (ibid.).

In this context, the scene where Quaid and Melina become trapped in a corridor by Lori and the UFB's robot police officers challenges Wiseman's apparent progressive representation of *Total Recall*'s female characters. Particularly crucial here is the moment when Lori taunts the duo from the opposite end of the corridor saying: 'you're a traitor, Hauser. And traitors get put to death! So you might want to give your little girlfriend a kiss goodbye. Long as she doesn't mind where those lips have been'.

At the moment that Melina hears Lori's statement regarding her implied sexual intercourse with Quaid, she suddenly becomes visibly angry. No longer able to contain her anger, she storms out into the corridor recklessly firing at Lori – who is safely covered by the wall. The irrational act almost gets her killed as the robots return fire. We can observe next however that she is fortuitously saved by the more 'rational' Quaid – who drags her back behind the corner just in time. Melina's behaviour in this scene displays an example of the irrationally of the female as instinct-driven and led by jealousy, highlighting a male gaze to *Total Recall*.

Lori herself spends the entirety of her screen time following her own egotistical agenda in a crazed pursuit of Quaid. Like Melina, she is depicted similarly irrational and impulse-led: she readily kills civilians, blows up elevators and disobeys direct orders from Coahaagen with the aim of achieving her own objective. Lori's representation in this way not only echoes Carlton's analysis of Delacourt (Jodie Foster) as a 'power-hungry ice queen' in *Elysium* (2013: 42), but it also highlights the same sexist paradigm of female irrationality noticeable in Melina. Because of this, any argument that *Total Recall* depicts its two prominent female leads in a progressive way is invalidated in that both are subordinate, answerable to, and safeguarded for, by their respective patriarchs Quaid and Coahaagen.

### 6.5 Concluding Remarks

Overall, *Total Recall* depicts corporate and governmental elites in a negative manner – largely following the example of the other films analysed in this thesis. The film appears to take cues from the Iraq War also, a trope that can be seen in UFB chancellor Coahaagen's heavy-handed invasion of the Colony and the way in which he manipulates the mass media to justify his intentions. However where *Total Recall* differs significantly from the other features is its particular focus on a loss of public trust in the intentions of political leaders. This is evident in its allegories of the post-9/11 conduct of former President George W. Bush and erstwhile UK Prime Minister Tony Blair (see 1.3), which can be detected through the film's portrayal of Coahaagen's prevaricating agenda.

The film's general characterisation of Coahaagen and the manner of Quaid's ascension from ordinary factory worker to someone who alters the economic dynamic between the privileged few and disadvantaged many illustrates this. Producer Tony Jaffe's comments on wealth inequality as 'the kind of dynamic we're into; classic working class people against the wealthy who control the real estate, and want to control the real estate of the planet' (Sciretta 2012: n.p.) also perhaps demonstrates the political stance of *Total Recall*'s production crew on the matter to some degree.

The two fight scenes analysed in 6.2 reflect a sense of dissatisfaction with neoliberal leadership when we collate the evidence provided in that section of the investigation with Corliss' idea on the role of Hollywood films as 'wish fulfilment,' and not a mechanism that provides the 'reinforcement of the audience's feelings of frustration...' (2012: n.p.). In this way it is important to bring attention to the symbolic intensity of Coahaagen's death at the hands of Quaid to support this proposal in that both moments appear constructed to demonstrate the actualisation of a desire for a fairer, less economically exploitative society – as well as one without leaders like George W. Bush and Tony Blair.

It is worth stressing that *Total Recall* is less overtly political than the other movies analysed in this study, preferring to focus on high-octane action entertainment and CGI visuals. Aside from a small reference to 'chemical warfare' in the film's opening monologue, *Total Recall* prefers not to approach the topic of environmental degradation like the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas*, and avoids tackling major political hot-potato issues like immigration and US healthcare like Blomkamp's *District 9* and *Elysium*. It must also be said that it is much less subtle with regards to its Iraq War symbolism than Cameron's *Avatar* although, as discussed above, allusions to this theme are certainly present.

*Total Recall* does break with pro-capitalist Hollywood through its firm denunciation of the intentions of neoliberal – as linked to corporate – leadership, and the way in which it draws attention to capitalism's structural flaws. On the other hand, we can observe how *Total Recall* quite substantially reinforces notions of neoliberal superiority when we take into account Ryan and Lenos' comments on Hollywood film as an effective ideological tool when it 'makes the ideal of individual mobility cohere with a reality of stagnant structural social inequality' (2012: 178).

When applying this to Quaid's dramatic ascension in *Total Recall*, we can discern a strong defence of US individualism as seen in other Hollywood features like Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and Muccino's *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006). To explain, the possibility of individual mobility is promoted as Quaid leaves behind his unfulfilling life as a simple factory worker and embarks upon a typical 'adventure' quintessential to US and European fictional storytelling that eventually leads him to become the god-like saviour of the repressed Colony population.

In this context, it appears that director Wiseman, producers Jaffe and Moritz, and the scriptwriters intended to bring attention to issues of social equality, private property ownership, and imperial expansionism, but in allowing heavily ingrained storytelling conventions critical

to the composition of twenty-first Hollywood film to be inserted into the story (exemplified in Wiseman's anecdote about Columbia's intervention in the scriptwriting process to rename 'New Asia' as the Colony),<sup>158</sup> *Total Recall* should be regarded as a feature that criticises particular aspects of neoliberal elitism, but ultimately stops short of a full denunciation of neoliberal identity.

Žižek speaks of a tendency for neoliberal elites to tolerate the 'moral war' (2009: 33) that does not fundamentally disrupt the established order; this is arguably embodied within the Resistance and their struggle for economic independence from the UFB when we review the story. The organisation is indeed whitewashed of any responsibility in the violent attacks they carry out on civilians – while any anger and culpability is instead directed at Coahaagen's supposedly malevolent 'regime'. The economic reasoning that underpins Matthias' terrorist campaign ensures that *Total Recall* completely stays within the paradigms acceptable to wider discursive codes; and while ostensibly alluding to the ever-present spectre of terrorism, the film sidesteps an opportunity to criticise in-depth a prominent manifest repercussion of twenty-first century imperialism, choosing not to confront the threat for example that religious fundamentalism poses to the specious ideals that underpin US neoliberalism

In this context, the fundamental element that perhaps corrupts any genuine anti-neoliberal message that *Total Recall* attempts to disseminate can be explained by Cremin in his discussion of collective identity:

Tragedy does indeed turn to farce and politics collapses into post-politics as all of us are called upon to demonstrate our common humanity, when the victim no longer behaves as a hapless individual into which our compassion can pour, it magically turns all of a sudden into a terrorist fundamentalist Other (2011: 83).

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<sup>158</sup> See Eisenberg and Rich (2012: n.p.).

Regarding Cremin's point, the 'acid test' is to compare the depiction of terrorists and the subject of terrorism in popular mainstream news and politics to the portrayal of the Resistance. In doing this, the prominent question of whether or not they are involved in killings/bombings is ignored as the audience's attention is directed, as discussed, towards the supposed crimes of the UFB and Cohaagen. Moreover, Hauser explicitly attempts to convince Quaid through a pre-recorded message that 'the Resistance are the ones I should be fighting for'. With this prompt the audience is minded to assume that Hauser is correct when reflecting upon the evidence that they are presented with throughout *Total Recall*. They have seen the expansionist imperial intentions of Cohaagen and the 'defenceless' population of the Colony as an 'innocent', and also silent, Other.

Moreover, the audience is simply expected to take Hauser's word for the Resistance's innocence, stating: 'listen, the Resistance are not terrorists. They just want equality for the Colony. And freedom. Those bombings in the UFB, they're being orchestrated by Cohaagen himself.'<sup>159</sup> No evidence is presented to support this at any point, and when we compare the uncritical presentation of the Resistance to the kind of rhetoric reserved for terrorists in mainstream news, they could certainly be categorised as an object to whom the viewer's compassion can be directed.

With Cohaagen dead at the film's climax, and the Colony celebrates its new found independence, it is intimated that society's problems are assumed to be over. The omnipresent news report confirms this:

People are spilling into the streets all across the Colony, celebrating what many hope will finally be a path to an independent nation. A new page in history has been turned

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<sup>159</sup> In this instance, Hauser's statement on behalf of the Colony Other would support Spivak's argument in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1999).

as the invasion so many feared ended with the destruction of the Fall, a long-time symbol of economic and political oppression.

Here a critical observer would be compelled to inquire about the concerns raised in the story that have yet to be solved: what about the initial problems of overcrowding that led to the invasion in the first place? What about the gross economic subordination in the relationship between the two territories? Who will replace Coahaagen as Chancellor of the UFB? In this way, the end of *Total Recall* in fact raises many more questions than it answers, but these are circumvented in the attention given to jubilant images of the liberated population of the Colony.

Considering this, it can be put forward that *Total Recall* functions as a fantasy in the manner that Corliss (2012) suggests when taking into account the Resistance movement's success at overcoming the UFB's dominance and Quaid as a relatively 'ordinary person' initiating decisive, authentic social change. This dynamic perhaps works to conceal an uncomfortable reality that can be articulated as the audience's knowledge that once the film has ended, they must return to their existence as a helpless post-political subject within the neoliberal domain.

Furthermore, when we look at the previous chapter analyses of *Avatar*'s Sully and *Elysium*'s Da Costa in which comparable circumstances present themselves, this need to address a profound lack within the lead protagonist's psyche suggests that the function of 'escape' and/or 'fantasy' is something that some contemporary Hollywood film storylines feel obligated to attend to in order to achieve audience satisfaction.<sup>160</sup> Despite the fact that Quaid's personality has been artificially fabricated only a few weeks earlier, the average viewer can willingly associate with his frustrations in an epoch where decades-long conviction to neoliberal policies have stagnated wages and reduced standards of living in the United States.

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<sup>160</sup> This would again align with Corliss' comments on Hollywood as 'wish fulfillment' (2012: n.p.).

At *Rekall*, as Quaid talks to McClane, the latter section of the rep's statement: 'we're going to give you that thing. Tell us your fantasy' suggests a deeper demand for the film to fulfil that essential missing component on the behalf of the viewer. Hence, the existential frustration – be it conscious or unconscious – that emanates from the viewer left without genuine institutional/political alternatives in which to initiate system change may indeed require some form of 'fantasy escape' to address this.

This would invalidate the assertions of O'Hehir (2012) and Morgenstern (2012) who dismiss *Total Recall*'s socio-political impact. Indeed, actual colonies will continue to exist in a similar way to the one seen the film until neoliberalism's principle of infinite growth economics finally exhausts itself or we institute radical structural change. Until that time, a discourse of liberation from neoliberal socio-economic domination appears the best that can be offered.

This chapter's analysis of *Total Recall* is the first to examine the film in this postcolonial context. By highlighting the manner in which the narrative reconstructs colonial dichotomies of space and identity for popular storytelling purposes, as well as drawing attention to its superficial rejection of an imagined 'cruel and heartless' elite corporate figure in the shape of Cohaagen, this investigation highlights *Total Recall* as an example of a prominent Hollywood science fiction film that offers only compensatory critique of neoliberal excess and a destabilisation of 'traditional' colonialism.

While a number of commentators in the mainstream press (Chang 2012, Corliss 2012 O'Hehir 2012) – in addition to Kolbuszewska (2015) and Fernández-Menicucci's (2014) – have commented on *Total Recall*'s socio-political themes, it would be interesting for other academic scholars to build upon the perspectives put forward here with the aim of enhancing the scope of research around this film. Especially considering its release at a time in-between the major (US) neoliberal economic and foreign policy failures of the early twenty-first century

(Iraq invasion, 2008 economic crash) and the consequent election of 'anti-establishment' candidate Donald Trump to the White House.

The seeds of discontent that many argue<sup>161</sup> have resulted in the election of Trump can be discerned in the way in which film's plot disseminates a clear distrust of political elites *vis-à-vis* UFB chancellor Coahaagen and the antagonist's heavy-handed invasion of the Colony for the sake of resources. In this context, this analysis of *Total Recall* and the findings it presents are surely relevant in the face of the current political *zeitgeist* and deserve further scrutiny in filmic analysis and literary criticism.

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<sup>161</sup> See Hooton (2016).



## ***Conclusion***

This thesis proposed to investigate three central research questions with the objective of determining the extent to which there is evidence for a declining loss of confidence in neoliberal power structures within the genre of (Hollywood) science fiction cinema. To reiterate, with a focus on the five major motion pictures analysed in chapters' two to six, these questions were:

- 1) In how far does each selected feature critique US neoliberalism?
- 2) To what extent do the protagonists, supporting characters and contextual settings support the idea of a change in established neoliberal and (neo)colonial representations?
- 3) Which basic neoliberal and (neo)colonial binaries continue to be disseminated in each film?

Before an in-depth discussion of this study's findings, the outcomes of each research question need to be briefly summarised. With regard to question one, in contrast to features like Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1997) and Burton's *Planet of the Apes* (2001) for instance – two movies that demonstrate an assured confidence in US neoliberal identity, the five films analysed here highlight a certain unease with the view that the neoliberal model can achieve global stability and order.

This is evident in the manner that the expansionist and military practices of governments and corporations are ridiculed and portrayed as inherently corrupt and malevolent. This 'loss of confidence' theme is also evident in that it is the working class protagonists (with the possible exception of Adam Ewing (Jim Sturgess) in the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas*) who are the ones responsible for instigating social change in each film, and not the antagonistic high-level government and/or corporate figures.

Each feature to an extent encourages the viewer to consider the way in which neoliberalism upholds long standing colonial and capitalist power structures, on the whole highlighting a need to revise communicative approaches with regard to cultural exchange with the Other. There is also an acknowledgement of the part that neoliberal policy plays in exacerbating environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality in *Cloud Atlas*, *Elysium* and *District 9* – indicating a major discontinuity with pro-neoliberal features. This suggests a re-evaluation of the parameters of US neoliberal identity, emphasising a move toward self-critical attitudes, and a promotion of social responsibility and environmental concern.

Of the five films, ostensibly free from conventional Hollywood studio constraints, *Cloud Atlas* can actually be said to challenge typical (neo)colonial and neoliberal features to a respectable degree, compared with say *Avatar* and *Total Recall* – films that generally speaking largely re-confirm key patterns, *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates fairly non-conventional casting choices, encourages a genuine ethos of cultural exchange, and challenges accepted film platitudes. Even so, there are a number of themes in the narrative that reconstruct traditional colonialism, which stresses that in some cases, even independent features have difficulty in overcoming deeply ingrained tendencies to depict the Other in a one-dimensional manner and promote aspects of colonial discourse.

Concerning research question two, there is a propensity for each of the five films to polarise the value systems of the lead antagonists – who are in each case portrayed one-dimensionally as exploitative, corrupt and inhumane – versus the protagonists, whose representation is clearly more multi-dimensional and sympathetic. This works to distance the audience from the detrimental practices of corporate and governmental elites and ultimately discourages any self-reflective deliberation by the individual at their own, admittedly indirect, complicity in the same process. This indicates substantial criticism in the opinion of this study.

In terms of the films' settings, clear dichotomies of space are constructed to delineate urban environments representative of European/US cityscapes from (often) non-urban domains of the Other. This is certainly true in the cases of *Cloud Atlas*, *Total Recall* and *Elysium*, each of which feature contrasting territories of metropolitan cityscapes representative of big business or decaying, run-down spaces 'indicative of...a descent into urban squalor' that 'contrast with the orderly and rational form of both Roman and European cities' (Horton 2007: 9) more familiar to US audiences.

Research question three focused on the extent to which basic (neo)colonial and neoliberal binaries are present in each feature. In this regard, despite promising storyline adjustments that may lead the viewer to reconsider their attitude to cultural exchange and question systemic problems inherent to neoliberal capitalism, each feature reinforces long-held presumptions of colonial and neoliberal patterns to varying degrees.

Firstly, preferable traits of the classic coloniser can be claimed to be still very much central to disseminating an identity that aims to justify the cultural element to neoliberalism. Characteristics that are detectable in the character of Phileas Fogg in Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) or Professor Challenger in Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912): radical individualism, superior intelligence, economic privilege, and calculating rationality, are very much apparent in *Avatar*'s Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), *Total Recall*'s Douglas Quaid (Colin Farrell) and *Elysium*'s Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) for example. The narrative function of a socially responsible white lead protagonist – who in each case delineates the value system of the viewer with that of prejudiced, inhumane neoliberal elites – only reinforces a discursive underpin white superiority. Each feature is therefore ineffectual in drawing the audience's attention to the role that neoliberal policies have in exacerbating the issues that they are attempting to highlight.

In light of this, while failings in the supposed preeminence of neoliberalism demand to be scrutinised in the public sphere of any democratic society, the legacy of colonialism and contemporary influence of neoliberal policy on global affairs means that the importance of the belief that US identity constructs are superior remains central to the tacit nature of sociopolitical messages of the selected films. So while in these examples, a socially responsible, humane protagonist is required to distance oneself from the perceived corruption and brutality of US neoliberalism, the newfound morality of this message cannot be said to highlight a truly progressive direction in the selected features.

The investigation will now discuss this thesis' research findings in more detail in the specific context of themes that are present in each narrative. In terms of substructure, like the film analysis chapters, it proposes to firstly look at prominent filmic discontinuities with (neo)colonial and neoliberal tendencies before moving on to discuss continuities with traditional representations.

One interesting discontinuative pattern that emerges from each film are recurring instances of symbolic killings against various individuals in positions of power. Regarding this, the deaths of each film's primary antagonists: Quaritch (Stephen Lang), Venter (David James), Delacourt (Jodie Foster) and Coahaagen (Brian Cranston) appear to exemplify a trend for Hollywood to castigate high-level corporate and governmental power (see 2.2, 3.2, 4.2, and 6.2). This proposal highlights a development on the argument of Rieder (2011) who claims that such as attacks are committed by the Other as 'payback' for centuries of colonial and imperial suppression. This study puts forward instead that the formulation of these characters and their overall influence on the respective films' plotlines can be linked to a wider public dissatisfaction with the manner in which the US government and other corporate institutions have mishandled socio-economic and foreign policy in the wake of the various global crises of the twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Support for the discursive nature of this storyline convention can be supported in the sustained commitment to depicting the corruption and inhumanity of these individuals in binary contrast to the nature of the lead and other protagonist characters as socially-responsible, overtly humane and apparently incorruptible. To explain further using the example of *Elysium*'s Delacourt as a primary antagonist (see 4.2): the character's sole *raison d'être* appears to be her wish to protect the exclusivity of the wealthy base from desperate immigrants. Lacking any characterisation with regard to the origins of her heartless nature, she is depicted as being completely devoid of any humanity regarding the plight of the diseased population down on Earth. Her reasons for implementing a highly privileged and racist immigration policy are not contextualised in any detail so as to ensure, this study claims, the viewer cannot rationalise her motivations or create any emotional association to her.

In this way, the analysis of Delacourt's one-dimensional antagonistic role goes some way to support Hampton and his discussion of *Elysium* as 'a big self-esteem booster shot for those affluent white folks who depend on cheap immigrant labor for their maids and gardeners and nannies but want to feel good about themselves in the bargain' (2014: 57). This is upheld by the findings presented in 4.5 where it is ultimately revealed at the end of *Elysium* that the desperate humanitarian situation on Earth could have at any time been alleviated by the mass deployment of the advanced medical technology situated on the base.

The fact that Delacourt chose not to allow this unambiguously distinguishes her from the compassionate humanity of protagonist Da Costa and anti-hero Spider (Wagner Moura) with whom the audience are encouraged to associate with (4.3). It can be claimed that this outcome highlights the levels to which the film is going to distance itself from unscrupulous governmental elites. In *Elysium* this delineates the identity, values and mentalities of the audience (coded protagonist Da Costa) with that of the Elysian authority figures as represented

by Delacourt, which facilitates a criticism of these kinds of prejudiced characters representative of (coded white) neoliberalism in contemporary Hollywood sci-fi.

*Total Recall*'s Cohaagen fulfils a similar one-dimensional role to Delacourt; upon his violent death for example, the audience is able to fully engage the emotional intensity of his demise through director Wiseman's decision to include a close up shot of the pain on the antagonist's face at the precise moment that he is stabbed by protagonist Quaid (see 6.2). The same scenario is evident in *Cloud Atlas* also in what can be suggested to represent a revenge attack by exploited immigrants upon authoritarian white power: here corporate-hired hitman Bill Smoke (Hugo Weaving) is battered to death with a steel pipe by a Latino factory worker (played by Doona Bae).<sup>162</sup>

In addition to attacks on specific antagonists, each case also appears to actively maintain a disavowal of wider big business and contemporary neoconservative governments, continuously portraying them in an exploitative, corrupt and inhumane way (2.2, 3.2, 4.2, 5.2, and 6.2). In this context, the thesis' discussions on *Cloud Atlas*, *Total Recall* and *District 9* adds to the comments of Jones (2010), Heller-Nicholas (2011), and Dickenson (2005) on anti-neoliberal tendencies in *Avatar* and *District 9* but goes further in its presentation of evidence that there is a discernable pattern regarding a change in attitudes to neoliberalism, colonial expansionism and elite power structures.

For example, *Cloud Atlas* criticises quite substantially blind conviction to neoliberalism as an economic model in its portrayal of the dystopian corpocracy of Neo Seoul. In the same way, corporate greed is a prominent focus in the San Francisco story also (5.2). A similar

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<sup>162</sup> In wider film, further evidence for the concept of this epochal 'hate figure' representative of institutionalised neoliberal inhumanity is discernable in McTeigue's *V for Vendetta* (2006) in the character of Peter Creedy (Tim Pigott-Smith) – ruthless head of the Norsefire government's secret police, and in Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2003) in the shape of US army general Colonel Bagley (Tony Goldwyn). In each case the deaths of each antagonist – Creedy, who has his neck snapped by V (Hugo Weaving) and Bagley, whose ruthless battlefield crimes are punished when he is stabbed by hero Algren (Tom Cruise), seems to have been constructed to appease audiences in a symbolic manner.

tendency can be observed in *Avatar* as manifest in the RDA mining company – who are prepared to slaughter vast numbers of Na’vi in their determination to extract the natural resource Unobtainium from under their treetop home (2.2). In *District 9*, trigger-happy private military contractor Multinational United illegally torture innocent aliens in a secret facility (visually evocative of the abuse that prisoners received at the hands of US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad in 2003) in their efforts to obtain the use of powerful alien weapons and sell them (it is implied) to the US (3.2).

The findings of this thesis also bring attention to the extent to which older colonial tendencies present the Self as a patriarchal, giver of knowledge – or ‘teacher’ to the Other, have been adjusted to potentially counteract ideas of self-doubt regarding neoliberal superiority. In *Avatar* for instance, to the best of my knowledge none of the many scholarly analyses explore how the above paradigm has been inverted in order to bring dissatisfied protagonist Sully back from his initial discontentedness articulated at the story’s outset (see 2.3).

While the above points articulate prominent discontinuities with typical (neo)colonial and neoliberal patterns identified in this research, each respective investigation also draws attention to instances in which these patterns are stabilised. In the *Total Recall* chapter, it is put forward that the film constructs the idea that there is a pseudo-progressive/liberal minority fighting at the heart of an otherwise autocratic white male-led conservative society each film – proposing that this indicates a criticism of US-led neoliberalism in the twenty-first century (6.5).

It is worth stressing that a similar pattern is also apparent in the other four films. In each case this liberal minority is presented as struggling with the (heavily implied) archaic, conservative ethics of a (white) ruling class that once championed exploitative colonialism and now propagates the ruthless polarising economics of neoliberalism. However, while attacking a particular form of corporate excess, each film does not denounce neoliberal economics outright; furthermore propensities to idealise of the Other and/or promote ideas of whiteness

as intellectually or rationally superior permeate each story. In the opinion of this thesis, this compensatory criticism allows the viewer to retain a moral position of authority over the antagonists without critical interrogation of the neoliberal system itself and, more importantly, the audience's role in the stabilisation and propagation of that system.

There are a number of examples to which one can point to in order to justify this claim: on *Elysium* for instance, while the base's government gives the impression of a reasonably modern society on the surface, there are certain laws, morals and values that do not correspond to the notion of a progressive nation state: the base employs capital punishment and hangs guilty criminals (4.3). In the opinion of this study, the explicit communication of these erroneous elements of Elysian society go some way to encouraging the viewer to dissociate their value-system with those who live on the base.

Earth's citizens are 'saved' by Da Costa at the climax of *Elysium* – and it is the proposal of this study that this deed works towards appeasing the audience of their own unease regarding a tacit acknowledgment of the need for segregative measures to be employed to exclude the Other from 'metropolitan space' (Said 1994: 61). A socio-political linkage to this scenario can be observed in the general shift to policies of immigration restriction in centre-left political parties in the US and many European countries over the last five years (4.5). In this context, this study disputes Debruge (2013) and Foundas (2013) – both of whom propose that *Elysium* is essentially a socialist film – and puts forward instead that the feature largely rejects socialism in its promotion of exclusive class division and more importantly, ultimately discourages dialogue with the Other at a human level.

This builds upon Peck's (2014) work, who claims similarly that Da Costa assumes the perspective of the viewer and is charged 'rebooting the current world order' (2014: 36). To counteract this unfair socio-economic circumstance, the exo-suit given to the dying Da Costa (which increases the protagonist's strength substantially) symbolically allows the apathetic



viewer to engage a vicarious fantasy in which he or she is able to take on for themselves corrupt, exploitative and/or oppressive symbols of neoliberalism depicted in the film and save the helpless Other. The images of Da Costa imparting his own influence on the wrongful circumstances around him – particularly once he dons the suit, diverts attention away from any actual frustrations with the structural flaws of neoliberalism and demonstrates quite explicitly Hollywood's ability to function as a medium that regulates the 'procedures of discourse' (Sherdian 2012: 119).

The importance of this was overlooked by the likes of Burghardt and Ott (2011), Peck (2014), and Veracini (2011) in their analyses of *Avatar*, *District 9* and *Elysium* for instance, with each choosing not to take into consideration the psychological effect that this diminishing loss of confidence in neoliberal identity has on US spectators. By promoting a shift towards the dissemination of socially responsible attitudes towards the Other and the environment, this study proposes that the films in question are largely attempting to address the symptoms of this apprehension.

In each example we can observe a narrative feature that consists of the protagonist liberating an invariable non-white underclass from corporate colonialism. This is exemplified in the liberation of the multiracial Colony in *Total Recall* (6.4), the exposure of the fabricant 'recycling' scandal in *Cloud Atlas* (5.5) and most explicitly in *Avatar* where the 'bad' corporate mining company (chiefly represented by Colonel Quartich) are banished from Pandora and a few remaining 'humane' individuals remain with the Na'vi and share in their natural paradise (2.5). Regarding *Avatar* in particular, the moral distinction between the two sets of characters is encapsulated by helicopter pilot Trudy Chacon (Michelle Rodriguez) who defects from the RDA to the alien's side after witnessing the inhumane acts of the mercenary soldier (2.2).

*Cloud Atlas* infers that the greed and corruption of Unanimity – guilty of the mass murder of clone workers – will eventually destroy itself, thus paving the way for an (implied inevitable)

post-neoliberal ‘colourblind’ paradise where the minority rights-era struggles of Martin Luther King and Harvey Milk for example will finally be realised to their fullest extent (5.5). In reaching this conclusion, the *Cloud Atlas* chapter draws on McAteer’s (2013) discussion of the film’s neoliberal critique and its liberal disposition but goes further in arguing that the manner in which the directing trio appear to assume in the Neo Seoul story that the viewer will accept the corpocracy’s implied corruption, economic greed and authoritarianism as truth demonstrates a faux-liberal approach at work in the narrative.

This is illustrated by bringing attention to the fact that dissatisfaction with the exploitative and relentless consumptionist tendency of everyday life in Neo Seoul is in actuality only communicated by rebel members of Union in the film. We do not hear from an everyday citizen of the city state and by all accounts, judging from the customers pictured in the scene at Sonmi’s former workplace Papa Song’s, most even seem relatively content (5.5). Once again, initial criticisms of neoliberal greed and militarised corporate brutality in each film must be measured against a tendency to place the lead white-male protagonist in the role of saviour to the Other, as well as designating this male lead as the individual responsible for instigating a move to towards a society founded upon prominent US values of individualism and liberty.

This thesis provides evidence of linkages with colonial discourse in each investigation. Of the five films, colonial continuities are most prominent in *Avatar* – something that has been the subject of discussion by many scholars already (Veracini 2011, James and Ue 2011, Adamson 2012, Burgchardt and Ott 2011). However, this analysis differs from those in providing new insights into Neytiri’s ostensive characterisation as a young female Other who demonstrates ‘progressive’ traits of independence and intelligence, an aspect of the character that a number of commentators (Cohen 2009, Ebert 2009) – and director Cameron himself – were eager to point out (see Keegan 2009). Chapter two stresses that contrary to their claims, Neytiri’s appearance reconstructs Orientalist exoticism, asserting that ultimately she is

presented as being in need of patriarchal protection by white protagonist Sully, thereby reinforcing a classic element of colonial discourse (2.4). The discussion of Pandora as an example of Orwell's 'land of adventure' (in Davidson 2001: 251) and its relationship to colonial cognitive codes of space also adds a significant new angle of investigation to *Avatar* that is absent from other research to the best of my knowledge.

In *District 9*, the character dynamic between Wikus (Sharlto Copely) and Christopher (Jason Cope) is similar. Here, Christopher comes to rely on the superior Wikus for help and patriarchal guidance. Thanks to the protagonist, he is firstly saved from execution by MNU guards and later protected from a rocket attack on a command module that he is piloting. The latter act ensures Christopher is able to dock with the giant ship that hovers above Johannesburg and escape from Earth with his young son. Before boarding the ship, Christopher briefly stops to inform Wikus that he will keep an earlier promise he made to him: 'I will come back for you. Three years, I promise'. Here, Christopher's loyalty towards his white saviour demonstrates another example of a typical element to colonial discourse as discussed by Bhabha regarding the 'dialectical relationship' (1990: 19) between the coloniser Self and the colonised Other (3.5). As far as I am aware, this study is the first to bring attention to this theme.

The decision to portray Christopher as a single parent to a young son feminises the character and once more, reinforces traditional colonial ideas regarding the patriarchal relationship between the Self and Other. This adds to Veracini's (2011) debate of the film, which prefers to focus upon settler colonial mentalities. Additionally, in *Elysium*, *Cloud Atlas* and *Total Recall*, we see a similar binary, with Frey, Sonmi-451 and Melina respectively assuming the roles of females in need of saving by their respective male leads Da Costa, Chang and Quaid (see 4.4, 5.4, and 6.4).

In all five movies the Other relies upon a white male to instigate a palpable change in their miserable circumstance. Again, minus a few characters like Christopher in *District 9*, Sonmi in *Cloud Atlas*, and Neytiri in *Avatar*, the population and/or group that requires saving is consistently both faceless and – more significantly in the context of overarching discursive codes of cognition – not white. In *Total Recall* it is the multiracial ‘Colony’: a melting pot of Asians, Eastern Europeans and Arabs (6.4); in *Cloud Atlas* it is the Asian fabricants; in *Elysium* it is the disadvantaged Latinos (4.4), and in *District 9* it is the aliens and their signified blackness (3.4). This aspect of the thesis argument lends further support to Spivak and her discussion on the so-called ‘silent’ subaltern (1999).

In this way, each narrative not only reinforces notions of the US as the symbolic centre of the world (Weaver-Hightower 2007), but also demonstrates a subconscious adherence to the hierarchical essentiality of European identity with ‘whiteness’ coded as superior. This despite a shift to self-critical approaches denouncing US militarism, imperial expansionism and corporate elitism in these sci-fi features. Sympathetic portrayals of the Other can also be concluded to be emblematic of Cremin’s idea of faux-liberalism (2011). The narrative surrounding the Other in these five films, however compassionate, is ultimately supplanted by neoliberal codes of cognition despite an explicit rejection of colonial racism in linguistic terms. This is exemplified in the embedded ‘natural’ hierarchy exposed in the master/slave relationship of Ewing and Autua in *Cloud Atlas* (see 5.4). This highlights a fallacy embedded within the narrative of a supposedly liberal film that suggests a continuity of colonial mentalities *vis-à-vis* the Self as superior to the Other.

A prominent original contribution to research in this thesis can be found in the manner in which normalised neoliberal patterns are affirmed in the articulation of spatial difference in each film. In *District 9*, Valdez-Moses et al (2010) and van Veuren (2012) debate this, drawing attention to an attempt by the director to designate certain territories of belonging to particular

characters. This study elaborates on those analyses by proposing that the film disseminates a triangulated spatial structure consisting of 1) Otherness space ('belonging' to the aliens and the District 9 township itself), 2) something that we may call corporate capitalist space (an urbanised downtown territory of Multinational United and its neocolonial agenda), and 3) a supposedly desirable 'cultural capitalist' space of stable, suburban comfort from which Wikus originates (see 3.3).

In the other four films, a more familiar spatial binary comparable to Edward Said's metropolitan and colonial space (1994: 61) is observable, with each feature constructing distinct visual and distinguishing contrasts between the 'territory' of the Other and the Self. Many scholars have failed to point this out – bar brief allusions to the notion in Holiday (2014) and Peck's (2014) analysis of *Elysium* (4.1). Regardless, this study suggests the Colony in *Total Recall*, LA 2154 of *Elysium* and Old Seoul of *Cloud Atlas* disseminate imagery of labyrinthic decay typical to the construct of colonial space (see Horton 2007: 9), following similar representations seen in Hollywood sci-fi films like Lynch's *Dune* (1984), Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997) and Lawrence's *The Hunger Games* series (2013, 2014, 2015). This confirms a linkage to colonial mentalities<sup>163</sup> given that in each case, these representations contrast quite explicitly with the ordered rationality of the European and US cityscape.

Overall, it can be concluded that colonial imagery plays a crucial role in maintaining the superiority of neoliberal identity in the five features selected for analysis in this investigation. Each film attempts to address the legacy of colonialism in some way within their wider narrative frameworks – often appearing to encourage varying degrees of cultural exchange with the Other as discussed. However in each respective story this is inadvertently subverted by

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<sup>163</sup> In these films the three spaces in question are constructed as exoticised, dangerous, and somewhat mysterious cityscapes, consisting of winding backstreets, disordered marketplaces full of 'mysterious' commodities and 'shady' characters. Such compositions are typical to colonial constructs of non-European places in the opinion of Horton (2007: 8).

scripting direction – as is the case with *Total Recall* (see Eisenberg and Rich 2012: n.p.), or casting decisions (i.e. *Avatar*'s Na'vi characters played prominently by black actors).

Where this thesis contributes significantly to original research in this area of colonial continuities is the initial postcolonial investigation into *Total Recall*, *Elysium* and *Cloud Atlas* – to which there is an existing scarcity minus Ng (2015) on *Cloud Atlas* and Peck (2014) on *Elysium*. Specifically, investigatory findings with regard to each of the five film's binary representations of space as related to colonial mentalities and their paradigmatic portrayals of a superior masculine Self versus an inferior (often feminised) Other highlight additional examples of originality.

We see that the lead protagonists play a crucial role in reinforcing the superiority of neoliberal identity in the twenty-first century, and in terms of Otherness, despite some encouraging portrayals, overall the Na'vi in *Avatar* and the aliens in *District 9* in particular (as well as the Earth and Colony populations in *Elysium* and *Total Recall*) are reminiscent of Rousseau's neo-romantic idea of the noble savage, portraying certain characteristics that the contemporary (neoliberal) Self appears to lack and/or desire.

To conclude, this thesis has brought attention to a propensity to criticise certain aspects of neoliberalism in five successful science fiction films. In each case, critiques of neocolonial expansionism, corporate greed, and military brutality are present, breaking with traditional patterns to either defend or whitewash these actions; in addition to this, we are also able to observe a move towards understanding the Other, encouraging cultural exchange and promoting an understanding of environmental issues that have been exacerbated by neoliberal policy. In this way it can be suggested that cracks of doubt regarding the superiority of neoliberal identity are detectable in these sci-fi features.

However, as the findings of film analyses chapters illustrate, in many cases Hollywood has some way to go before it can claim to be a medium that accurately reflects the complex,

dynamic and global nature of the world today, often regressing as it does into stereotypical representations of the Other and reinforcing assumptions of the Self as superior. Furthermore, although critics may point out that it is not the job of what is essentially a medium of entertainment to undo such formulas, the overwhelming body of research that presents evidence of Hollywood's role as a key disseminator of US value-systems, colonial discourse and hegemonic positions means that the industry does have a duty of care to inform and even educate audiences in this context – especially in response to the results of the 2016 US presidential election and the advancement of other far-right political movements in Europe in the last 10 years.

The audience also needs to play their part in this: despite ostensible humanity and socially responsibility on display in all five films, as we have seen, genuine socio-economic equality is one that neoliberal policy cannot produce, and until Hollywood audiences realise that the drive for system change must begin with them, we will continue to observe long-held dichotomies of racial and cultural hierarchy readily accepted as a fundamental component of mainstream storytelling. In this regard, considering Riegler, whose study comes to the conclusion that: 'as [recent] box office results have demonstrated, audiences preferred [movies with] indirect approaches to overtly political ones' (2016: 16), it appears that this realisation remains some time away.

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